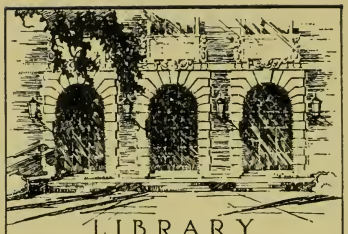
A MAN'S MISTAKE

BY THE AUTHOR OF

ST OLAVE'S



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A MAN'S MISTAKE.

VOL. I.

A MAN'S MISTAKE

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"ST. OLAVE'S," "JANITA'S CROSS," "ANNETTE,"
"LITTLE MISS PRIMROSE,"

&c., &c.

"Whatsoever thou takest in hand, remember the end,
and thou shalt never do amiss."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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A MAN'S MISTAKE.

CHAPTER I.

EVERYONE in Abbot's Florey said that Mr. Aubury, of Florey Castle, would marry Mrs. Maria Plummersleigh, a rather young widow, who had come to pay an indefinitely long visit to Mrs. Polemont, the doctor's wife.

Everyone, that is, whose opinion on such a subject could be received as conclusive, and who was not under the influence of undue partiality. There were two or three, doubtless very much under the influence of such partiality, who did not scruple to affirm that, could all the worth

and beauty extant in the village be concentrated in the person of one woman, that woman would still be too poor a wife for the master of Florey Castle; so great were his own deservings, so little those of the ladies amongst whom his choice would probably be made. And then, to set against this over-appreciation of the gentleman's good qualities, there were others ready, for their part, to say that, looked at in the light of her admirable parish activities, the willingness with which she entered upon all kinds of church work, and the diligence shown by her in the visitation of her district, not to speak of her skill in the administration of business details, Mrs. Plummersleigh would have been a wife fit for the very Bishop of the Diocese. Nay, they might go farther, and say that, could the Primate of All England himself marry such a one, he would be blest up to his deservings, great though those might be.

But still the rank and file of common sense in Abbot's Florey, including Mrs. Flowerdale, the vicar's wife, and her husband, and the two Miss Laudervilles, daughters of old General Lauderville (women of keen perception in all social affairs), and Mrs. Gallen, widow of Canon Gallen, of Broadminster, and Mr. and Mrs. Sturt —Mr. Sturt was a retired solicitor, important in parish matters—and Mrs. Cresswell, the curate's wife, and finally Mrs. Polemont herself, with whom the lady in question was staying: all agreed that, if Mr. Aubury and Mrs. Plummersleigh did make a match of it, it would be a very sensible match indeed.

Mr. Aubury was the owner and occupier of Florey Castle, which, with its two hundred acres of farm-land, had been left to him by his aunt, Miss Goodenough, an old lady who used to live upon the property herself. She bequeathed to him, along with it, the services of Luke and

Betsey Martlet, a very respectable couple, who had been, one bailiff, and the other housekeeper, at the place for the last dozen years of her life. Indeed, Betsey was, as one might say, born and bred on the property, being the daughter of a former bailiff, and having entered Miss Goodenough's service at thirteen as poultry-girl, from which lowly estate she had risen through the successive grades of kitchen-maid, under-servant, and cook to the honourable position of housekeeper. Nay much more than that; for, as Betsey knew very well, though she never talked about it except to Martlet, her husband, she kept not only her mistress's home, but her mistress's purse, and her mistress's opinions, and her mistress's likes and dislikes, and almost everything else that appertained to her mistress, and kept them so well, too, that when the old lady was nigh upon death she thought she could not do her nephew a kinder turn

than commit him and little Linnet Aubury to the same keeping.

So Luke and Betsey lived on still at the place, and did their duties, both of them, with a faithfulness which made them the most contented old couple in the parish. A trifle loquacious perhaps now and then, and not sparing of that generous despotism which ancient retainers are apt to exercise; but true-hearted withal, and as ready to do battle for their master's interests as any mailed squire or pikeman who, in days gone by, had had the safety of that homestead committed to his care.

Florey Castle sounded grandly, but the reality was by no means equal to the sound. In mediæval times it had been a fortress, and there was still a round tower with battlements and arrow slits at the north end of the house. There was a keep also, which, having long ago been despoiled of its flanking walls, served only now as a porter's lodge, facing the high-

road between Abbot's Florey and Broadminster. This keep, as to its exterior, was little altered from the feudal days, when many an old knight had defended it against the Warwicks and Plantagenets. Still the barred portcullis loomed grimly down from its hiding-place behind the central gateway; still the great iron-clamped and studded doors were there, marked with many a sword-dint which beleaguering enemy had given them in days of yore; still the old drawbridge stretched, mossy, and decaying, and useless, across the moat, which was traversed now instead by a good wide carriage-path alongside of it. And one could see yet, high above that doorway, mended rents and chasms in the masonry, where Cromwell's cannon had gone through when Cromwell's men besieged the castle in King Charles' time.

But instead of giving entrance, as in those days, to a courtyard whose stony

pavement rang with the clash of battle-axe and spear, that doorway now simply admitted the visitor to a trimly-kept lawn, dotted with peaceful buttercups and daisies, with here and there a stray hoop or ball which hinted at the modern innovation of croquet. And in place of armed retainer, keeping watch and ward over his master's chattels, Grace and Tidy, meekest of serving-maidens, flitted to and fro in front or back kitchen, obeying Betsey Martlet's behests, who, since Miss Goodenough's death, had been, to all intents and purposes, queen-regnant there, and as imperious a queen too as ever held sceptre. And this contrast between the outer and inner aspect of the place was wont to produce a feeling of incongruity, as though one should be introduced to a stranger of martial aspect, with grizzly beard and beetling brows, and, after respecting him accordingly, should find, upon closer acquaintance made, that he

scents his pocket-handkerchiefs and writes amatory sonnets in the local papers. At least that was how Mrs. Polemont, the doctor's wife, always said it impressed her, though, for politeness sake, she never mentioned anything of the sort to Mr. Aubury.

But still, on the whole, Florey Castle was a fine old homestead, in spite of its discrepancies and general air of patchiness. And an honest life, honest as any that could have been lived in the feudal days, wore on its quiet course there, not much talked of nor much noticed, until now that Mrs. Maria Plummersleigh had come to stay in the village, and people began to whisper that a bride might find her way through the crumbling old keep, which mailed knight and warrior no longer needed to guard.

It was with the violets and primroses of late spring that Mrs. Plummersleigh made her appearance in Abbot's Florey, and

now Midsummer Day was passed without any word spoken of her departure. Indeed, so far from any word being spoken of her departure, events seemed to point in the direction of a permanent residence. For the vicar had offered her a tract district, which looked as if he at any rate considered her a fixture. And Mrs. Polemont had urged her to accept the offer, which seemed still more conclusive. And, to clinch everything, Mrs. Plummersleigh *had* accepted it, and might be seen, every Tuesday and Friday of her life, going about the Broadminster end of the village with an embroidered black silk bag, as trim and compact as herself, upon her arm, and wearing that habitude of settled quiet and authority which of right appertains to the residents of a place, as distinguished from migratory strangers who just come and go as it pleases them.

Clearly Mrs. Plummersleigh had taken up her abode with the doctor's wife. Pos-

sibly, as that lady had no family, and her husband, who was considerably older than herself, found his professional engagements increasing upon him, the long summer days were a trifle tedious to her, particularly as she was a bright, chatty, impulsive little woman, full of energy, good will, and activity, and yet with, as the phrase goes, very few "resources within herself." And for people who were in that condition Abbot's Florey was as dull a place as could be imagined, being, indeed, only redeemed from positive insignificance by a layer of genuine Saxon herring-bone work half way up the tower of its little bit of a church, over which layer archæological societies from far and near came to ponder, always associating their ponderings with a substantial luncheon at the vicar's or elsewhere. But then, as Mrs. Polemont was not an archæologist, the herring-bone work went for nothing. Something that could talk and be talked

to was more to the purpose. So Mrs. Plummersleigh stayed.

They were not new acquaintances. Mrs. Plummersleigh had been lady housekeeper with Mr. Fledborough, Mrs. Polemont's father, a widower, when Mrs. Polemont herself was a girl at home—that is, at Broadminster, three miles away from Abbot's Florey. She had been there eight or nine years, in fact, had become quite like one of the family, when Dr. Polemont came and stole away Mr. Fledborough's pretty daughter. And she would no doubt have stayed longer, if Mr. Fledborough himself had not married a wife, and so, as it were, taken the ground away from under her feet. She then went into quiet lodgings near the minster, but, not finding the locality suit her health, she had moved about from place to place, at last accepting Mrs. Polemont's invitation to spend a few weeks at Abbot's Florey.

And so accommodating the young wife

found her, and so cheery and companionable during those long mornings, and so judicious in keeping out of the way when the doctor did come in to resume his own place, and so full of practical wisdom and common-sense in all those little difficulties which surround a not very experienced housekeeper during the first years of her married life, that the few weeks were extended to many, and Abbot's Florey, in consideration of the tract district offered and accepted, began to consider her, as aforesaid, a settled resident.

Mrs. Plummersleigh was not young—thirty at the very least—and pretty she was not, and Nature had failed to give her that charm of manner which is sometimes more attractive than beauty, and she had not that air of high breeding which goes farther with some people than either grace or looks, and she lacked the fire of intellect, and one could scarcely, without partiality or hypocrisy, call her even interest-

ing. And yet somehow she was a universal favourite. She had such admirable tact in fitting herself to the peculiarities of the people with whom she lived that they were always glad to have her with them. She was ready without being intrusive. She never appeared to be attentively listening to conversation which was not directly addressed to her, yet at any point she could fall in, and become, if not eager, at least sufficiently interested to carry on the subject. She never gossiped, and yet somehow she knew all about everybody. People who had alighted upon a tit-bit of scandal rarely flew off with it to her, but at the same time, if anyone wanted to listen to interesting little personal details, Mrs. Plummersleigh was the lady who could relate them by the score, having an accurate and circumstantial memory for everything she had once heard. Moreover, she was very discreet, very safe, always more ready to listen than to talk,

but still with enough to say when there appeared a sufficient necessity for saying it. Quiet, ladylike in dress, manner, and deportment, neither obtrusive nor over retiring—one of those women, in short, who are invaluable if you do happen to want them, and never in your way if you do not.

And therefore, if Mr. Aubury did intend to marry, Abbot's Florey said he could not find a more suitable wife than Mrs. Maria Plummersleigh.

CHAPTER II.

"AND why on earth the poor man does *not* marry, is just one of those things which I cannot make out."

It was Mrs. Polemont who said this, and she said it to Mrs. Flowerdale, the vicar's wife, who was calling upon her.

"Such a home as he could make for anyone, Mrs. Flowerdale, with that lovely old place all his own, no rent to pay for it, or anything of the sort. And I am quite sure that, if Mr. Aubury does not keep a brougham and a man in livery, it is only because he cares so little for anything that might have an appearance of

display. His income must be equal to it over and over again."

For Mrs. Polemont, as a girl, had never achieved the distinction of a carriage of any kind; and, even as the doctor's wife of Abbot's Florey, she only rode in a little open phaeton with a hood for wet weather; comfortable enough, but with nothing approaching to style about it. And if her heart did at the present moment hold an unsatisfied longing, it was that one day she might call upon the vicar's wife in a brougham of her very own, with a man in livery, equally her very own, to sit upon the box and receive her orders.

"Well, I look at it from another point of view entirely," replied Mrs. Flowerdale, who, coming of a tolerably wealthy old family, had been accustomed to ride in a carriage "and pair" up to the day of her marriage with the vicar, and who, though only driving what she called a basket now, had yet the familiar recollection of the

other to fall back upon, instead of regarding it, as Mrs. Polemont did, through the haze of an unfulfilled longing. "Mr. Aubury is very wise to keep to his present modest establishment; for people who have to live upon land now-a-days never know what they may come to. But, for the sake of Linnet, he ought to make a change of some sort. Mrs. Polemont, that girl is being ruined, simply ruined, for want of suitable female companionship."

Mrs. Flowerdale said this with emphasis and a certain air of severity. She was the vicar's wife, and therefore she knew all about everybody in the parish. And she was a person of much more vigorous perception—at least she thought so—than her husband, who liked to speak as well as he could of his people all round, and therefore she made it her business to acquire an accurate knowledge of what was going on, so that he might not be de-

ceived in his charitable ministrations. And though she had no daughters of her own, only a grown-up son at Oxford, still she had a couple of nieces, Miss Loverton and Miss Georgiana Loverton, who, now that their boarding-school education was finished, came to her for such long visits that she might almost be said to have the entire charge of them. And therefore she knew as well as most people what the behaviour of girls of seventeen or eighteen ought to be, and had a right to express her opinion, too.

"Ruined, Mrs. Polemont. That is the only word to express it. She has no manners at all. I question whether, if she danced with a strange gentleman at a ball in Broadminster one night, and happened to meet him in the street next day, she would have the faintest idea what to do. I say it is deplorable, neither more nor less."

"Well, you see," said Mrs. Polemont,

who shared the vicar's weakness in the matter of liking to speak well of everybody, "as she never goes to balls, there is not so much need for her to have any ideas about what to do. And somehow, I daresay, it would come naturally to her. Linnet is a dear, good-hearted little thing as ever stepped."

"Oh! that goes without saying. I never meant to hint that she had not been correctly brought up—nothing of the sort. But for Mr. Aubury to let her have the advantage of a lady like Miss Grey to train her until sixteen, and then, when the poor old body died, never to look for anyone to replace her, but to throw Linnet upon the almost sole companionship of Mrs. Martlet, it is simply monstrous. However, it is just what unpractical men like Mr. Aubury are always doing."

And Mrs. Flowerdale, a keen, clear-eyed, aristocratic-faced woman, well-bred down to her very finger-tips, and devoted

to her husband and her church, and the proprieties of life, looked away through the open window into the doctor's garden, and past its blossoming lime-trees to the grey old tower of Florey Castle, which rose half a mile away, and within whose grim shadow Linnet Aubury was being given over to ruin.

"It must be rather lonely for her," admitted Mrs. Polemont. "But I daresay she spends half her time with Miss Clerehart, and you could not find a truer lady in all Abbot's Florey than she is. And so wonderfully well read, too, at least so they say. Of course I don't know anything about *that*."

"It is not that sort of thing at all, Mrs. Polemont. It is having a lady in the house with her, to make a sort of atmosphere of good breeding and refinement. If Mr. Aubury did not intend to replace Miss Grey, he ought to have married, or engaged a lady-companion for Linnet."

"I wonder if he would have married Miss Grey if she had not died," said Mrs. Polemont, speculatively. "She seems, by what people say, to have been a very superior person, only rather old-fashioned. I always think it is rather pleasant to marry anyone you have lived in the house with, because then there is not so much to find out about them. I don't know really who there is about here that would do for him, unless——"

Mrs. Polemont paused in time. The name on the very tip of her tongue was the name of Maria Plummersleigh, and to have spoken it out loud would have been such a mistake. Because Mrs. Flowerdale was a woman who pounced down upon you so, and brought you to book for anything you said, and she would be sure to mention it to Mrs. Plummersleigh herself, if not to Mr. Aubury, and that would spoil everything.

For the doctor's little wife wanted to

see all her friends happily married like herself, but she was enough of a lady not to mention names, and she was politic enough to know that mentioning them damaged the chances of anything satisfactory being accomplished. That sort of thing was rather like the alum basket-making of which she had been so fond when she was a little girl. You might get your wire and weave your basket as skilfully as you liked, and wind your worsted over it as carefully, and then make your alum solution of the right strength, and, with all the tenderness in the world, introduce your handiwork to it. But having put it in, if you meddled with the jar in which the basket was suspended, or gave it a tilt, or almost looked at it an hour too soon, everything was spoiled, and your chances were over. The alum might crystallize anywhere else, but upon the structure which with so much pains you had prepared it certainly would *not*

settle. And there was no such thing as melting it up again, after it had once deposited itself in the wrong place, and so starting the experiment afresh. Your basket might do again well enough, but for alum you must get a new supply.

Now, in the present instance, Mrs. Plummersleigh was the basket, and good little Mrs. Polemont, who had a very warm regard for her, fondly hoped that the worsted of circumstance and opportunity, which she had woven round her by inviting her to come to Abbot's Florey for an indefinite period, might prove a suitable basis for the alum of Mr. Aubury's preference to crystallize upon. Only matters were in that condition now when perfect silence was essential to the success of the operation. One must not tilt the jar, indeed scarcely so much as peep into it, lest the love crystals should sink to the bottom in a shapeless mass, instead of arranging themselves where they would

be both useful and ornamental. So, correcting herself in time, she went on with a vagueness which could not give the basket so much as the least stir,

"Perhaps he might meet with some one at a distance. But then he scarcely ever goes away from home, and he is so shy that I don't believe he would have courage to make the venture, unless the lady helped him very much. He is just one of those men that a lady *could* help when it came to making an offer."

"Poor man! But we must let him alone. We cannot, after all, choose for other people."

Mrs. Flowerdale said this reflectively, but with a tone which implied that she would have exercised the privilege of choice if she could. And then there was a little pause, and Mrs. Polemont returned to Linnet as being a more general subject.

"She is a very good girl, only unfortunate in her manners, as you say. There

is not a bit of anything really wrong about her. If she ever does get into mischief, it is with the best intentions. And then, you see, she has no one at home to put her into a different way. Mr. Aubury goes mooning about from morning to night over the farm. And as for Mrs. Martlet, why, she worships the very ground that Linnet treads upon. You could never make her believe that the child did anything wrong."

"Exactly. And that is just why Mr. Aubury ought to have some one about him who *can* be made to believe it, for the sake of Linnet's own future welfare. The only thing would be for him to marry."

But at that moment Mrs. Plummersleigh came in. She had been round her district. She had the embroidered, black silk bag in her hand. She brought an atmosphere of quietness into the room. There was such an entire absence of emphasis about her. If she thought or expressed herself

keenly about things at all, they were not the things people talk of in afternoon calls.

Mrs. Polemont felt slightly confused, and for a moment there was an awkward pause. Mrs. Plummersleigh might almost think the conversation had been about herself, but, if so, she made no sign. And her hostess, regaining self-possession, said,

"We were just speaking of Linnet Aubury. Mrs. Flowerdale thinks it such a pity she has no one to be a companion to her at home, and I think so too."

"Indeed," and Mrs. Plummersleigh folded her empty bag, and laid it carefully down. "I don't think I know Miss Aubury well enough to say anything about it. I have not happened to meet her very often."

"Probably not," said Mrs. Flowerdale. "You are not likely ever to meet her, unless you go across some of the pastures on the castle farm; and then, as likely as

not, you will find her in the company of a shaggy pony and two or three dogs of different sorts, with her skirts arranged somewhat after the fashion of a Leith fishwife, and her black hair streaming behind, or sticking out all over like Medusa's."

"Such pretty hair though," put in Mrs. Polemont.

"Yes; which makes it all the more to be regretted that she should wear it in such a fashion. Unless, indeed, Mr. Aubury intends her to marry Keith Moriston, and then both the hair and the fashion of the draperies would be quite in keeping. You have seen young Moriston, have you not, Mrs. Polemont?"

"I think so. You mean the young man who comes to see Miss Clerehart?"

"The same. And Miss Clerehart does not make any secret of the fact that he is the son of a rude shepherd somewhere in some out of the way part of Scotland. So

that, you see, in that case, they would be admirably well matched. But, seriously, I do think it is a mistake for Mr. Aubury to let her go so much to Miss Clerehart's house, if it is true that Moriston is to spend his long vacation there. What *is* the name of the place now that he comes from? Airdrie something. Mrs. Plummersleigh, do you know Scotland at all?"

"I used to go there once," replied that lady, turning to the window to trim away some dead leaves from the geraniums in the flower-baskets; "but I have not visited the country for some time now. I find the climate of England suits me better."

"Yes. You suffer from neuralgia, don't you?"

"I do, I am sorry to say."

"Ah! a tiresome thing. And it is so good of you to take a district for us when you are not strong. But Abbot's Florey is a very good place for people who have neuralgia. You see, we are sheltered from

the wind, except just where it blows across the moor behind Florey Castle, and we are on gravel soil; and so we have everything in our favour. I believe, if you were to stay here long enough, you would become almost robust. But do not you find this place almost relaxing after Scotland?"

Mrs. Plummersleigh looked slightly ruffled, only slightly, and she went on trimming off the dead leaves, her face being turned aside. She had certainly said nothing about having lived in Scotland, and yet Mrs. Flowerdale appeared to take it for granted, Mrs. Flowerdale who was not a woman to talk at random like wild, impulsive little Mrs. Polemont. And to mix it all up, too, with the mention of this raw shepherd lad. As if, because she had happened to admit a slight knowledge of Scotland, she must needs be expected to give information about Airdrie Muir and its people, big and little. It was puzzling and annoying too.

But Mrs. Flowerdale, as the vicar's wife, was not a lady to be quarrelled with, nor was Mrs. Plummersleigh, under present circumstances, a lady to quarrel; she only kept picking away the dead leaves until the geraniums looked almost as trim and tidy as herself, and then she began to talk about the ignorance of the women in her district, a subject upon which Mrs. Flowerdale, who had prejudices against the working classes, was always ready to be interested. And no more was said about Airdrie Muir.

CHAPTER III.

IF the croquet lawn, with its peaceful buttercups and daisies, to which the keep of Florey Castle gave the visitor entrance, was not exactly the prospect one might look for in connection with a baronial fortress, so neither was the master himself much in accordance with his property, being, as to his outward appearance, a slight man, shy, silent, retiring, with kindly, meditative eyes, a benevolent forehead, and a general air of what superficial observers might call indecision about him. That is to say, with reference to the indecision, he had

not self-esteem enough to consider his own opinions on indifferent matters as the only opinions worth listening to, and, therefore, he advanced them with carelessness or hesitation, even allowing them occasionally to be carried off prisoners by a more active opponent, or slain upon the battle-field of argument, with a placidity which, to some men, seemed almost like cowardice. At any rate, so it appeared to Mr. Cresswell, the curate, who was always ready to fight through a whole church committee meeting about the colours which should be worn for the ecclesiastical seasons; and so it appeared also to Mr. Sturt, who was in the habit of bringing the entire batteries of his logic to bear upon the question of whether the parish soup should be thickened in winter time with split peas or Egyptian lentils, the latter being an article which was just then beginning to push itself upon the notice of economists.

By these men, therefore, the master of Florey Castle was spoken of as a weak brother, useful so far as subscriptions went, because of his liberal turn of mind in money matters, and not entirely without value when a vote more or less was wanted in affairs connected with rural administration, but of definitely small account in the serious business of life, and of still less importance as a pillar of the church to which he belonged.

Of course strangers coming to the place naturally thought that Mr. Aubury was a widower, and that Linnet was his only child; but in this they were quite mistaken. However, the mistake was of little consequence, for everyone in Abbot's Florey knew his history, and was willing to tell it if necessary, the facts being these:

Mr. Aubury's father had been a major in the Indian army, and Owen Aubury had neither brother nor sister until the

old man, after remaining a widower for more than a dozen years, married a bright, pretty, incompetent young wife, an orphan who had been brought up in Calcutta. Linnet was their daughter. At the time of her birth, her step-brother was well on to thirty, and fairly prospering as partner with two or three other gentlemen on a coffee plantation in Ceylon; so fairly prospering indeed that he was able to think of marriage, and was already preparing the home to which, after a year more of hard work, he hoped to bring the lady who had long been waiting for him in England.

When his little girl was about six years old the major died, and a few months afterwards his young widow died too, leaving Owen Aubury sole guardian of the orphan Linnet, who had neither kith nor kin belonging to her save himself. And he had not much to guard either in the shape of substantial worldly inter-

ests; for old Major Aubury had nothing to live upon but his retiring pension, and his wife was, to put the case in its mildest form, not an economical woman; so that, excepting her allowance of some fifty pounds a year as an officer's orphan, Linnet was entirely dependent upon what her step-brother chose to do for her.

Owen Aubury had been home once, just before that coffee-plantation began to prosper satisfactorily; and now, a year or two after his father's death, he came home again, bringing the little girl with him, intending to place her with a suitable person, and then return to Ceylon, returning not alone, he hoped. Before the arrangements for this return were made, old Miss Goodenough, his mother's sister, died, leaving him the Florey Castle property. And so, appointing an agent to his share of the plantation, he settled down on the farm, and took Linnet to live with him; events having so fallen out that, returning

or not returning, his home would have been a lonely one, but for her.

That was the history of Owen Aubury of Florey Castle, so far as it had been made known to the general public of Abbot's Florey—the marriage episode excepted, which had never been spoken of at all. And everyone said how noble it was of him to devote himself so exclusively to the care of his little sister, instead of marrying, as a man of his position might have done, into one of the best families of the neighbourhood, and going in for all the amusements of a country gentleman.

He did his best, after a man's fashion, for the child. He engaged a Miss Grey, an elderly gentlewoman of the old school, to give her such education as was necessary; and very conscientiously and very efficiently she gave it for ten years, at the end of which time she died, leaving Linnet, at sixteen, sufficiently advanced, Mr. Au-

bury thought, to carry on alone, or under his direction, what further studies were necessary.

Then, for instruction in household matters, she had Mrs. Martlet, who had even bettered her own lessons from Miss Good-enough; and for other companionship she had her step-brother, and the pony, and the dogs—so severely commented upon by Mrs. Flowerdale—and Miss Clerehart, or Miss Alvisa, as by her more intimate friends she was generally called, a maiden lady of thirty-five, or thereabouts, who lived at the old vicarage, a pretty house whose garden joined the plantation at the end of the castle property.

Under such influences as these Linnet Aubury had managed to grow up into a tolerably sweet and loveable maidenhood, though, as Mrs. Flowerdale had very truly remarked, her manners were not of the sort generally to be met with in Broadminster ball-rooms, and the fashion of her

dress, and the length of her skirts, and the way she wore her wealth of rippling dark hair very much corresponded with the manners, being in the highest degree unconventional.

Of course, as time went on, people naturally wondered that Mr. Aubury did not marry. He could have chosen for himself a wife—at least so far as money matters went—when he took possession of the castle property full ten years before. For the land was all his own, unencumbered by mortgage or burden of any sort, and Miss Goodenough had left him a tidy little sum besides, in other investments. And he must be five and forty now, if a day, as they could make out very well by comparing dates, though he might have passed for a dozen years younger, being of that slight build which carries age well, if, in addition, he had been as brisk and wide-awake in his

manners as most unmarried men of eligible means.

But then Mr. Aubury was not brisk. He might almost be described as quite the reverse, though without the least hint of uncharitableness in the description. For a kinder man, a more benevolent, a more considerate in thought, word, and act, there could not be. Indeed the Apostle Paul must have had such a one in his mind when he spoke of that "good man" for whom some would even dare to die; the good, as opposed to the merely righteous man, who will give what is just, but at the same time will look to receive as much as he gives. But when you had said that Mr. Aubury was in that sense of the word a good man, you must stop. You could not with the least show of correctness say in addition that he was a brisk man, or a wide-awake man, or a man who could be looked upon as an acquisition to society, or of the sort ever to make

a figure in the world, or that if strife came he would be a hero in it, or that if his little sister Linnet chose to ramble about over the farm with her pony and her dogs, instead of copying the latest style in dress and manners, as exemplified by Mrs. Flowerdale's nieces, the Misses Loverton, he would bring down the strong hand of brotherly authority upon her, compelling her to amend her ways and her doings, and show herself to society as what she had a right to be considered, a fashionable member of it.

No, you had to stop at the goodness. Perhaps some people would have said that if you could have stopped before it, and had the other things instead, the briskness and wide-awakeness and general air of worldly wisdom, Owen Aubury would have been a more useful member of society, a married member, probably, and therefore a better centre for dinners and dances and other hospitalities which people natur-

ally expect from the owner of a handsome property. However, such as he was, there they had to leave him, content with hoping that some day, before it was too late for themselves to participate in the benefit of the change, a wife would teach him better things.

And he and Linnet were very happy. The girl was never so much in her own element as when rambling about with her staid old brother over the farm property, hearing him discuss crops and timber with Martlet, the bailiff, leaving them occasionally to go off with Snip after a rabbit, or to chase the dragon-flies down the dingle to the swan-pools which spread out under the willow-trees at the end of it. And for excitement there was the fishing in those same pools, where the pike lay so lazily under the sedgy banks, and the tench rose to dart at the flies which skimmed in the clear places where the sunshine could reach them between the

overhanging willow-boughs. And there was the hunt two or three times a month during the cold weather; for Mr. Aubury, though a kind-hearted man and a member of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, could still find it consistent with his principles to follow the hounds, which some people considered as an anomaly, until he justified himself by maintaining that the fox got as much sport out of it as anyone else. And this was one of the very few theories for which Mr. Aubury would show fight, instead of leaving it to be slain or carried captive from the afore-mentioned battle-field of argument, like the—to him—smaller matters of coloured stoles and parish-soup thickenings. Still it *was* slain sometimes, and mostly by Miss Alvisa Clerehart.

Then, at night, Linnet used to sit at her work in the cosy, thick-walled old dining-room, which had once been the chapel of the castle, and which, with its groined

roof and Gothic windows, had many a story to tell to one who, like Owen Aubury's sister, knew every line of the history of the place. Sitting there in her favourite corner, close by the little niche where once the holy water had been kept, she could recall the days when monk and priest had said their prayers within those walls, or conquered knight had fled for refuge, when spear and shield were no more of any avail, and only wholesome fear of the spiritual arm could hold back his victors from slaying him, as he knelt by the now long since ruined altar-steps, praying the saints to protect him in his need. She could recall, too, the story of grand old Mistress Bouverie, whose husband dwelt in the old castle once, and who held it so stoutly, whilst he fought for his rights elsewhere, against a band of marauders who had crossed over from beyond the fen country. Held it to the very death, suffering them to enter the

keep only over her dead body, which they did, and then buried her with all honour, so the story went, knowing her for a noble enemy, if a vanquished one.

And whilst her brother sat and dreamed in his easy-chair by the fire—dreamed, perhaps, of what life might have been could he have come home but a little earlier, and so returned not alone to the nest he had made ready for his wife amongst the shady groves of Ceylon—Linnet, for whom there was no past save that of books, would re-people the old castle, and make it live again through siege and fire and storm, and hear the clash of spears upon its paved courtyard, where now the daisies grew, and see the steel flashing from its battlements, and the arrows winging forth from the narrow slits in the tower, and Cromwell's cannon-balls crashing through the keep, and his flag—the flag of a nation's liberty—flying above its great doorway.

Until a sigh from the arm-chair roused her, and tossing her curls aside, and dismissing the old days with a shake and a fling, she would away to her brother's side, and, with a voice the sweetest he had ever heard save one, would sing to him, her head resting on his arm as she sang, those English ballads he loved so well, because they told of joy which he had known and lost, and of faith which he would hold even to the end.

Then Martlet would come in with the big keys, and Rex, the Newfoundland, would stretch himself for his sleep on the skin by the bolted door, and, with a kiss and a quiet "God bless you!" from the brother who loved her, Linnet would away to dream it all again in her own little chamber over the chapel.

CHAPTER IV.

FOR the rest, Linnet was about as wild as any of the squirrels in the castle plantations, and enjoyed her life in almost as unrestrained a fashion, the chief discipline which came into it now being from Mrs. Martlet, who was determined that, whatever else the girl lacked, she should not go out into the world, whenever her time came to do so, without at least knowing how to guide the affairs of a house with discretion.

"For look here, Miss Linnet," she would say; "it isn't laid out for you to spend all your time hopping round about like the

crickets at the fireside, and as like as not you won't have the luck to find as warm a spot as them to creep into when the time for hopping is done. And there's another thing, Miss Linnet, when I'm gone—and I can't expect myself to last for ever—where will you find another like me, though I say it as shouldn't? And me watching the outgo of every shilling, as I couldn't do it more carefully if it was my very own; besides seeing that the master has the best of everything in season set before him, as the head of a house has a right to. It's that sort of thing you must learn to do, Miss Linnet darling, against the time when you haven't me to do it for you."

But Mrs. Martlet had talked like that ever since Linnet could remember, and still the old lady, if at sixty one could call her old, worked on as heartily as ever: still strong to fetch and carry, and stout to stand over her preserving pans and

tubs of home-made wine, and with an arm as vigorous to turn the churn, and toss the butter, and carry about the great bowls of milk in the dairy. So Linnet only shook back her mass of curls, and whistled for Snip, and set off to the swan-pools at the bottom of the dingle, where the excitement of seeing a pike leap at the bait, or luring the squirrels to come for nuts was to her what balls and parties are to most girls.

And then there were the visits to Miss Alvisa Clerehart, a better education, her brother rightly judged, than any he could have given her, so far as the forming of character was concerned, by cultivating any amount of the best society in Abbot's Florey or Broadminster.

Miss Alvisa was an invalid, had been so for the last ten years, during which time she had never been out of the gates of her own garden. She had been thrown from her horse in riding, and had received

an injury to the spine, which obliged her always to lie down. Dr. Polemont, who had visited her professionally all those years, still held to it that some day she would be up and about again, but the some day was so long in coming that Miss Alvisa, instead of waiting for it, set herself resolutely to make the best she could of the position at present appointed to her. She was not obliged to work for a living, but she *was* obliged to work for daily interest and occupation.

So instead of betaking herself to constant meditation, which some good people thought would be more profitable to her, she studied the German language, of which she already knew a little, having been at a school in Dresden, and got employment from a London publisher in translating books for him. She also etched illustrations for children's story-books, and Mr. Flowerdale, the vicar, would sometimes find her almost bursting with merriment

over some humorous idea which had just come into her head, and which she was trying to realize with pen and ink.

The vicar was a man who appreciated that sort of thing better than his wife did. He could laugh as heartily as Miss Alvisa herself over the comical pictures, and feel as keen an interest in the quaint or pathetic ones, and it never entered into his mind, as it did into Mrs. Flowerdale's, that employment of an exclusively religious character would have been more in accordance with the position of an invalid. If it had, it would probably have made little difference to Miss Alvisa herself, who had a human life to live, with needs lying deeper than anyone in all Abbot's Florey, except Owen Aubury himself, knew of.

Then for literature, Linnet had her brother's library, where she gathered for herself as freely as her favourite pony,

Bobtail, gathered for his more material needs in the little paddock beyond the garden-hedge; and with as good a result, too, of healthy, wholesome development.

Linnet knew every corner of that library as familiarly as Bobtail did the paddock, and had her own choice spots of greenest pasture, the greenest and freshest of them all being the shelf where Mallory's "History of King Arthur, and the Knights of the Round Table," was kept. Linnet could say chapters of those old volumes by heart. Many a talk had she had with Miss Alvisa, when German translations and humorous etchings were put aside, about the deep meaning which underlies those stories of mediæval days: how they are but the pictures of a human life, true to itself through all time and outward change; how the old knightly struggle with foul fiend, and enemy,

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and traitor, the pressing through pathless forest and over stormy sea, the wounds received almost unto death, the noble deeds done and perils overcome, until at last the vision of the Holy Grail was given, and the knight passed through death into the presence of his "fair Father, Christ," were but a story told in picture and allegory of the soul's struggle with its spiritual enemy as it fares through the lower life to the higher and nobler one. For to achieve that quest of the Sangreal is to see God as the pure in heart see Him; and so seeing Him, and knowing His will and doing it, the body of self falls off, and the spirit is freed to heaven. And to this quest of the Holy Grail the noblest only are called, chosen from the company of loyal, faithful souls to greater suffering and sorer loss than their fellows; and to win it, one must, like Sir Galahad, lose his life, and to miss it, one need only, like Sir Lancelot, re-

member how sweet that life is, and, tasting all its sweetness, lose it at the last. And none better than Miss Alvisa could tell the meaning of those old tales, for she had lived through it all herself. Truly if ever knight achieved the quest of the Sangreal, she, a quiet woman, lying in her curtained room through years and years of suffering, had so done; and to win it, she had, like Sir Galahad, suffered the loss of many things, yet, losing them all, she could say, as the old knight did, "I thank thee, for now I see that that hath been my desire for many a day."

So, with Miss Clerehart for her friend, Linnet did not fare badly, and the life lived by the brother and sister at Florey Castle was peaceful and pleasant as need be, until the summer of that year when Mrs. Plummersleigh came to stay with the doctor's wife, and then Mrs. Martlet began to notice what she emphatically called "a change" in Mr. Aubury.

Was it that the land was not prospering, or that money affairs were going wrong, or that some bodily ailment was preying upon him, or that a cloud had come up between him and his little step-sister, now growing into woman's estate? No, not a cloud between those two, at any rate; for the old woman, whose perceptions were keen enough where Linnet's happiness was concerned, took note that never had the master's eyes rested so lovingly upon the girl, or his voice dropped to such a tender tone in speaking to her. Linnet and her brother falling out! no, not that, anything but that, and the girl herself as bright and cheerful as ever, wandering about the pastures with Bobtail and singing through the house, ready for anything and everything but the learning of those domestic duties which some day would surely be so important to her.

But something there was, and sorely good Mrs. Martlet puzzled herself to find it out, though not a word would she speak to anyone about it—as yet.

CHAPTER V.

THIS was the something:

In the June of that summer, Owen Aubury and his sister were strolling one sunny morning round the farm, not exactly in company, however, for Linnet was constantly starting off with Snip after a stray squirrel that rustled through the copse, or some bright-bodied dragon-fly that lured them away in the direction of the swan-pools, so leaving Mr. Aubury to meditate at his leisure over the pleasant prospect of the ten acre wheat-field, where the young, yellowy-green ears were already beginning to promise what they would do

when harvest came. And he was thus meditating after his quiet fashion when Mr. Flowerdale, walking homewards from Pangfoss, an outlying district in his parish, struck into one of the farm pastures, across which there was a footpath to the high-road, and so caught sight of Mr. Aubury, alone just then amongst his young crops.

The vicar cleared the stile at a bound and joined him.

"Good morning, Aubury. All alone again?"

"Not quite. Linnet's over there in the plantation."

"Where she'll stay, if it's a rabbit that took her there, so it comes to the same thing."

And then, after a remark or two on the weather, and a few words of compliment, which indeed seemed only its due, to the softly-waving summer wheat, Mr. Flowerdale dropped a step or two nearer to his

companion, and seemed to be settling down for a chat.

"I say, Aubury, should you mind my telling you what has been on my mind a good deal this last month or so?"

"Not a bit, Mr. Flowerdale. Say on."

"It's about Linnet. You know she isn't such a child as she used to be."

"Isn't she? I don't see much difference."

"Ay, *you* don't, of course. That's just where it is. People who are always seeing don't see. Now I daresay she's only little Miss Pinafore to you, just as she was half a score years ago; but to other people she is a handsome young girl, quite ready to take her own place in society."

"Nonsense, Mr. Flowerdale," said Linnet's brother, to whom the idea of her being ready for anything else than a scamper with Bobtail, or an evening of ballad-singing with himself, seemed simply

ridiculous. "As if society had any place in it for a little harum-scarum like my sister."

"Society always has a place in it for a pretty girl who lives in a home like this, Aubury. And, whether you are prepared for it or not, she will soon find her way into it. The truth is, my dear fellow, Miss Aubury has come to an age when she needs a lady to look after her a little, and go out with her, and introduce her, and that sort of thing, you know."

Mr. Aubury looked perplexed. This was quite a new light upon his duty as guardian of the rosy-cheeked, black-haired little orphan girl.

Mr. Flowerdale continued,

"You can't put old heads upon young shoulders, and, if you could, they wouldn't look half so pretty as the young ones. But if you could get heads a little bit older, and shoulders a little bit older too, to keep alongside of the others, it wouldn't

be a bad thing. Not that you would ever marry for your *own* sake, Aubury."

The vicar had said wisely there, though not knowing how wisely. For his own sake the master of Florey Castle was never likely to marry. And, until now, the thought that for another's sake he should do so had not presented itself to his mind. And this principle lay at the root of Owen Aubury's nature: that what he would not do for himself, in great things or in smaller, he would do for another. Had he then, he asked himself, strolling along there by the vicar's side in the summer sunshine, had he in any way failed in his duty to Linnet? Had he been thinking of her as a child, ministering to her necessities as a child, amusing himself with her as a child, whilst, uncared for by him, all a woman's thoughts had been growing up within her? And he remembered the one woman he had ever loved—truly he need never look far

off to remember her—and he could but own to himself that she was no older than Linnet when first they learned the sweet truth that out of all the world they belonged to each other. But then Linnet had always been such a child. A child's pleasures satisfied her now. He had never seen a cloud upon her face yet that a whinny from Bobtail or a kiss from himself could not drive away.

"I think she is happy," he said, looking across the field to where she was chasing Snip and the squirrels, diving in and out amongst the copse, her bright blue skirts indeed kilted, as Mrs. Flowerdale had remarked, slightly after the fashion of a Leith fishwife, her long dark curls careering about in no sort of fashion at all.

Linnet ready to go to balls and parties? Surely not. She must be happier amongst the hazel copse. But he thought it with a doubt. He was always ready to doubt

anything which depended upon his own well doing.

"Happy," and the vicar's blue eyes were full of kindness, as he too looked away to the little orphan girl. "Happy? Well, I should say if you wanted to find anyone who had just about as much enjoyment put into her life as she could hold, inside and out, Linnet Aubury would be as near the mark as you could come. But you know, my dear sir, one has to think about other things in this world than being happy."

"Of course, there is another world to prepare for," answered Mr. Aubury, respectfully, concluding that the vicar wished to give a spiritual turn to the conversation, a thing he was not in the habit of doing on chance occasions like the present, though still a clergyman might now and then think it necessary to temper the good things of this life by reference to one in which they would all count for nothing.

Mr. Flowerdale only laughed good-humouredly.

"Do you know, I thought as soon as ever I said that you would take it by the the wrong handle. I'm not such a simpleton as to come preaching to you, Aubury, about things of that kind. I only wish I may have as clean a bill to show as you have when the time comes. And, even if it wasn't so, I wouldn't waylay you about it under cover of Linnet's affairs. No, what I meant was this. A girl may be as happy as she likes, but when she comes to Linnet's age people will say—and very naturally, too—that you are not doing your duty by her unless you have a lady in the house who can make it convenient for her to go into society a little, and see what is going on, and learn how to tie her bonnet-strings properly, and all that sort of thing. You know what I mean now, don't you?"

Mr. Aubury glanced at the short petti-

coats, and the hat-strings not tied at all. Yes, he began to know what Mr. Flowerdale meant, and the vicar continued,

"You know one has to provide for these things sooner or later, and, if you don't mind my saying it to you, Aubury, you couldn't provide for them better than by marrying a suitable lady yourself. You see you haven't any aunts, or sisters, or anything, who could come and stay with you, and everybody is ready to talk about a girl who goes about by herself, or who stops at home and doesn't know how to go about at all. If I have heard the question asked once, I have heard it asked a hundred times, why doesn't that fellow Aubury marry?"

"You see that is a matter a man must settle for himself," answered the master of Florey Castle, quietly.

"Well, yes, he must, unless he happens to have some sensible women folk about

who can settle it for him, and I am not sure whether it doesn't get settled better in that way than when he takes it altogether into his own hands. But really I was not thinking so much about yourself as about Linnet, and how she needs somebody just now to be a sort of elder sister to her."

But at that moment Linnet, with Snip and Bobtail after her, came up to the stile which led into the wheat-field, and she was over it with a bound much more active than the vicar's, before she caught sight of him. Then her face flushed all over rosy red, and, with another bound, she was back on the pasture side, giving neither look nor sign of recognition to the clerical wide-awake which was so politely raised. And in a moment she was out of sight amongst the copse, flying hat-strings, tumbling curls, kilted-up skirts, and everything.

"There, you see," said the vicar, with a smile. "Not quite ready for the ball-room yet, eh, Aubury?"

And Mr. Aubury was obliged to smile too, though he felt uncomfortable, he knew not why. And they began to talk of something else.

CHAPTER VI.

OWEN AUBURY was never just the same again, after that ten minutes' chat with Mr. Flowerdale.

When they parted at the gate leading into the high-road, he turned aside into the dingle, following it as far as the swan-pools, and then crossing a stile into a lane hard by the church, where stood an old-fashioned house, Miss Alvisa Clerehart's home. Miss Alvisa had gone to live there with her mother when Captain Clerehart died, nearly thirty years before. There she had grown up into girlhood, and from girlhood into happy maidenhood, and there

she had dreamed her dreams and built her castles in the air, as happy maidens will; and there she had loved and been loved, and under that big spreading beech-tree on the lawn she had sat in the twilight for speech with her lover, and at those old stone-pillared gates, with their guarding griffins all mossed and crumbling now with age, she had said good-bye to him, hoping for sweeter welcome soon. And through those same gates, before ever that welcome could be spoken, they brought her crippled one day to the couch from which, through ten long years, she had never risen, never thought now to rise again.

And yet, in all Abbot's Florey, there was none brighter than Miss Alvisa Clerehart. There was no house in the place that gathered more intellectual life into it than hers did, nor any fireside where upon occasion one could hear better things said, nor any home where the heart of home

beat more truly in tender love and faithful service than this, from which so much that some might only call joy was cast out.

Miss Alvisa lay in her little parlour now, whose window looked across the lawn, with its big spreading beech-tree, to the garden-gate, and thence to the swan-pools at the bottom of the castle grounds. Owen Aubury knew she was there by the embroidered curtain quite drawn aside from the window. In summer time, when Miss Alvisa was not lying under the beech-tree, her couch was placed beside the window, so that she could draw and undraw the curtain as she pleased. And when it was undrawn he might come in.

Most days he did come in, for Miss Alvisa liked to talk over with him what was going on in that world of religion, politics, literature, and art from which for ten years she had been shut out. And the talk was not always on these subjects,

either. Miss Clerehart was not entirely ignorant upon turnips and the rotation of crops. The cottages upon her little bit of farm land, which Mr. Aubury overlooked for her along with his own, were as well-built, and well-drained, and well-ventilated, and kept in as good order as those of the lord of the manor himself, the Duke of Moreland, who lived at Abbot's Florey Park, and was a very stirring man in royal commissions upon sanitary matters. And Miss Alvisa knew a good ear of wheat when she saw it, and could give her opinion about phosphates and bone manures as applied to the land, and knew when you might safely crop your ground with roots, and at what yearly intervals cereals should be introduced, as well as any farmer in the parish, though she knew when to talk about such things and when to be silent.

But it was neither wheat, nor turnips, nor politics, nor literature, nor labourers'

cottages which took Owen Aubury day by day to that old house by the church, and made him come out of it sad, quiet, yet with a look of purpose in his face as of a man who will do his work and fill his place in the world, though from *his* fireside, too, so much that that world calls joy has been cast out.

However, he only lingered outside today, though the drawn-back curtain told him that he might go in—only lingered and loitered, and turned back and looked towards the little window, close to which Miss Alvisa lay. If a hand had beckoned him, he would have obeyed. But the hand which should have beckoned was just then writing the finishing paragraphs of a chapter of German translation, and the manuscript must be sent away by that evening's post.

At last, with a more perplexed look than was generally upon his face when he left the old house by the church, Owen Au-

bury struck off into the fields, and made for a bit of fir-plantation belonging to the park. There was no lovelier bit of woodland in all the place, and a right of road lay through it on to the moor beyond. Sauntering in the thick covert of the firs, far off the soft note of the wood-pigeon, round him the rustle of last year's leaves as a frightened rabbit hurried past over them, he tried to think things into shape for himself. His duty to Linnet.

So long as the girl was bright and happy, so long as she looked up to him out of those clear, dark eyes, in which, search as deeply as he might, he could find nothing but truth, purity, and innocence, Mr. Aubury had not troubled himself much as to whether what those outside called his duty was done or undone.

Legally, as Linnet's guardian, morally, as her nearest, if not her only near, relation in all the world, it was his place to

stand between her and any evil which might happen to mind, body, or estate. Taking these three one by one he might say he had a clear enough conscience. Estate Linnet had none to guard, though little had the want of it troubled her as yet, so carefully had he sheltered her from the pinch of that genteel poverty which, but for him, would have been her portion. As for her bodily health, she was straight as a poplar and strong as a sapling oak, ruddy as the roses which grew round her own casement window over that chapel-room, clear-eyed as the dew-drops which fell from them in early morning, firm in her saddle at the end of a day's hunting, quick to climb the steep moorland which sloped upward behind the castle farm, and able to reach its summit with neither panting breath nor trembling pulse. And as for walking—but then she never had anyone to walk with: "going out with the dogs" not being in those days

considered part of a young girl's duty.

As for her mental furnishing, and due maidenly accomplishments, old Miss Grey had looked after them to such purpose that at eighteen Linnet could stitch like Penelope, and spell out a French or German story, and darn stockings—though she hated doing it—so well that one could not tell where the old part ended and the new began; and be a not unintelligent companion for her brother when the history of his own or other times occupied his thoughts; and sketch from Nature little bits and scraps of landscape so that you could distinguish an oak from an elm, and either from the blackberry or ivy which wandered round it.

Having done thus much, old Miss Grey had been content, and so had Mr. Aubury. He did not go often into other people's houses himself, but, when he did, he never found a young girl in any of them who had a better head, a kinder heart, a truer

ring of ladyhood about her than his young step-sister Linnet.

But the vicar had let in a new light upon him. All these good and pleasant things were means to an end, not the end itself. Linnet was not growing up into that beautiful, strong, young maidenhood of hers to wear it out into middle life and old age along with him there in that mediæval castle, amongst its musty armour, its moth-eaten books, its remains of ruined battlements and ivy-trailed arrow-slits, its choice historical associations and grim memories of bloodshed or imprisonment; nor even out in the broad sunshine of the acres which surrounded it, with a reversion to herself of pasture-lands and wheat-fields when he could no longer watch the young blades greening upon them. The vicar had not said it, perhaps the vicar had not even thought it, but Owen Aubury's conscience, keen almost to a fault in everything which touched the

interests of those whom he had undertaken to protect, told him that there was a fibre of selfishness in all that he had been doing for Linnet, in all that he was hoping she would become to him. And, of all others, selfishness was the sin from which he recoiled. He knew himself timid, doubtful, hesitating, where great issues were at stake; shrinking where strong, immediate action was required from him; feeble where to strike was to give sharp if needful pain; but selfish he did not know himself to be, until that chance ten minutes' conversation had shown him what others, true and generous as himself, thought he owed to the girl over whom he had been set as her protector.

He had been thinking only of what he could be to her, of what she could be to him. Such as life was now to them both, such he looked for it to remain indefinitely. He had forgotten that some day

thoughts would waken in Linnet's heart which she could not tell out altogether to himself, longings that no love of his could satisfy, interests in which he could not share, except as a looker-on. Her life must go on to its fair fruition, whilst his rested quietly, its best in the past. He could but be the feeding root and sheltering leaf to the blossom whose home was in the sunshine; and, as that blossom opened wider and wider to give its richest scent and colour, the leaves which clasped it once must shrivel to the ground—their work was done.

Linnet had been growing up all these years that some day she might become the joy of a good man's home; and to keep her from it would be a wrong. Nay, even the negative way of keeping her from it by simply making her as happy as he could, there in the old castle with himself, would be a wrong too. That was what Mr. Flowerdale had meant. Linnet ought

to have her own chances in life as other girls had them. And to that end she ought to go into society, and from time to time society ought to come to her. That was also what Mr. Flowerdale had meant.

Mr. Aubury had thought of that sometimes in a vague, uncircumstantial sort of way. Linnet might marry. Mrs. Martlet had said as much when she urged the necessity of giving her regular lessons in pastry and preserves and pickles and home-made wines. Though where, living as she did in that quiet, retired old homestead, and seeing no one but himself and the vicar, a husband was to come from, was a question he had not yet considered. Still less had it ever occurred to him, as good Mr. Flowerdale had now plainly suggested, that he himself ought to do something in behalf of Linnet's matrimonial interests by providing a lady who might go into company with her, and

teach her all those pretty little tricks of manner and fashion and neat-handedness which the vicar had broadly generalised under the head of "knowing how to tie one's bonnet-strings." And the vicar was a man who knew what women thought about things. Doubtless he was only expressing, in his friendly way, what Mrs. Flowerdale had said over and over again to him by their own fireside, and Mrs. Flowerdale was a lady of strong sense, though she had a way of putting that sense rather severely at times.

The gist of the whole matter was this: he ought to marry a wife.

CHAPTER VII.

THAT was stating the case in plain language. But, once having let the thought enter his mind, Owen Aubury could not rest until he had reasoned out with himself whether or not it was truth that had been spoken to him. If truth, he would do what was right, let the doing cost what it might.

And when any man has a will firmly set to do what is right, and a conscience ready to smite him keenly for even the semblance of short-coming, and an active benevolence which longs to do the best for everyone whom it is his place to protect, he can

easily convince himself that a course of action which is distasteful to him may, by reason of that very distastefulness, be the one which, of all others, he ought to pursue.

The axiom—"If two roads lie before thee, and thou knowest not which to follow, choose that which for thyself is fullest of thorns," is a safe one for the majority of men, who require, as a rule, little pressure to compel them into a path where preference is already gently drawing. But it has been the ruin of many a profoundly conscientious nature, of some amongst men, of more amongst women, because a deeply religious woman lives habitually by conscience, sometimes a misdirected conscience, rather than by reason. And Owen Aubury had a woman's keenness of conscience, a woman's fineness of principle, a woman's almost infinite power of self-sacrifice, power to follow the right even so much the more resolutely because it

leads through peril and pain to what must surely be peace at last. And so it was that the vicar's words had fallen into good ground.

"Mr. Aubury, I am sure you are the last man in the world to trespass upon anyone else's rights, but you know the old duke *is* so particular about his game, and the doctor says there are heaps of young birds all about here. That is why they have so many notices put up. And there might even be man-traps, too."

Mrs. Polemont said this with a sound of mischief and merriment in her voice. And looking up and clearing away the mist of speculations which had been gathering round him for the last hour, Owen Aubury found himself trampling down the young green ferns in the choicest corner of the Duke of Moreland's preserves, whilst only a few yards on his right was a wire fencing, on the other

side of which Mrs. Polemont and her friend Mrs. Plummersleigh were following the legitimate road through the plantation. How he had got there from the old vicarage he could not tell, but there he was, and, if he had been a poor man, it might have gone hardly with him, gamekeepers being thick upon the ground just then.

"Never mind, we won't tell of you," said Mrs. Polemont. "I hate getting a man into trouble. I lifted a little lad over the fence here only the other day, because he had got lost, and I saw one of the keepers coming. But *you* don't go birds'-nesting, I should think!"

"I really don't know where I was going," said Mr. Aubury, very truthfully. "I suppose I missed my way amongst the side-paths. At any rate, I am very much obliged to you for bringing me to order."

"Yes, and the duke such a man as he is about his game. Knock one of his labourers about as much as you like, and it is not

of the slightest consequence, but lay your hands on a partridge and then see what will happen. However, I should think they are almost strong enough now to get out of your way, if you should happen to disturb them; and look, here is a bit of wire fencing lower than the rest, you can jump over it as easily as can be."

Which Mr. Aubury did, and found himself side by side with the two ladies.

"I think I need not introduce you to Mrs. Plummersleigh," said the doctor's wife. "You have met before."

Mr. Aubury had no recollection of it; still it might be so. Nor did Mrs. Plummersleigh, who saw that he had forgotten her, attempt to bring herself to his remembrance. Raising his hat, he bowed to a lady who was quiet-looking, fair-complexioned, not quite so old, perhaps, as Miss Alvisa. And then he fell back to the other side of Mrs. Polemont.

"Mrs. Plummersleigh is paying me a

long visit, and I want her to become well acquainted with the beauties of Abbot's Florey. Not that it is such a remarkably pretty place; but, when one is fresh from the narrow streets of Broadminster, a little goes a long way. I remember, when I was first married and came here, this bit of woodland scenery seemed perfection. Just this little bit, you know, between the keeper's cottage and the old heronry."

"It seems perfection to me now," said Mr. Aubury, quietly.

But Mrs. Polemont only laughed.

"Oh! nonsense, Mr. Aubury, and you living no one knows how many years amongst those magnificent jungles in Ceylon. As if a few mop-handles of fir-trees, and some twopenny-halfpenny wild-flowers, could be perfection to *you!* You know, Mrs. Plummersleigh, Mr. Aubury has lived half his life in the East. He only says this is pretty just to please us."

Mrs. Plummersleigh leaned forward a

little now, enough to take note of the gentleman who had forgotten her. Not that that was of any consequence, however, for she was not a woman who cared to make impressions. She knew Ceylon chiefly in connection with the spicy breezes which blow over it in Bishop Heber's hymn, and of course she had read of it in missionary notices, and in her geography; but she had never yet met a man who had lived there, except at a meeting of the Propagation Society in Broadminster, and he was entirely too yellow for anyone to take an interest in him, unless it might be the interest of pity. Now Mr. Aubury was not yellow at all, and so there was no barrier to being interested in him. But he might have matched a new sovereign for colouring so far as any manifestation on Mrs. Plummersleigh's part went. Apparently her interest was not easily roused, nor did she exert herself to rouse that of

others. Mrs. Polemont had to do most of the talking.

But in that slight forward movement Mr. Aubury had caught sight of her face again, and something in its quietness pleased him. It was the face of a woman who had made up her mind as to what she had to do in the world; a woman who had no eagerness, no restlessness about her; a woman who was content to walk steadily forward on the broad straight track of duty. This was the story Mrs. Plummersleigh's face told to Mr. Aubury before she drew back again into her place on the further side of Mrs. Polemont.

"Well, I must say," continued that vivacious little lady, "I do like you for being able to praise this bit of plantation path. Most men who have travelled make a point of looking down upon everything in their native country. Now there is Mr. Burstborough. Do you know Mr. Burstborough?"

"No," said Mr. Aubury. "I know scarcely anybody about here."

"Well, he is only about here for a temporary thing. He belongs to Broadminster, and has taken a place here for the fishing, and he was in Switzerland last August, and ever since he shuts his eyes when he goes through a fir-plantation, for fear, he says, of spoiling the recollection. Now I say, if it has that effect upon people, they had better stay at home. I call them mop-handles, but I love them all the same, and I can't tell you how much enjoyment I get out of them and the twopenny-halfpenny wild-flowers too. And I am so glad to hear you say you think they are worth looking at. I do like people to care for their own country, whether it is fashionable or not."

Now Owen Aubury loved that bit of plantation so much because, walking down it one summer morning, years and years ago, with the only woman who had ever

touched his heart, he had told her the story of his love; and she, listening, had let him tell on, and told her own in answer. And that was why Owen Aubury had never married. But of course Mrs. Polemont did not know anything about it. No one did, except those two.

"How is Linnet, Mr. Aubury?"

"Oh! all right, thank you; tearing about over the farm, and amusing herself with Snip and the rest of them. She was out with me this morning, and I declare she knows the look of the land almost as well as a man could do."

"Curious!"

And there was just the faintest little hint of surprise, perhaps reproof, in Mrs. Polemont's voice and the way in which she drew herself aside. How could Mr. Aubury allow that sort of thing? But in a moment she began again, as cheerily as ever,

"I suppose you will let her go into

company a little some of these days?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I must. It is what most girls have to do, sooner or later."

"Have to do? Oh! come, Mr. Aubury, you need not put it in that way. Why, it is just the very thing of all others that they enjoy most."

"Well, you see, Linnet has not much taste for it."

"That is because she has had no opportunity of finding out whether she has a taste or not. She will be wonderfully different from other girls, if she does not like a dance now and then. It seems almost unkind not to give her the opportunity. Dear me! what would *my* life have been to me before I was married, if I could not have had all that sort of fun? You know, it is what a girl naturally expects."

Mr. Aubury sighed. Just the vicar's conversation over again. It must be,

then, that he had been dealing hardly with Linnet, in keeping her from the amusements of other girls, or at any rate in not giving her the chance of joining in them. And it was to this that Mrs. Polemont's next remark pointed.

"It is such a pity when a young girl has no one to take her to anything of the kind. It seems to shut her up so. Now, if that dear old Miss Alvisa had not been such an invalid, she would have been the very person."

Mr. Aubury made no reply.

"The *very* person, because, you know, she does not think too much about that sort of thing, and she would just have given Linnet a proper insight into society, without letting her get entirely taken up by it. I wish I could do anything for her myself."

"I wish you could," said Mr. Aubury, helplessly; and then, to his great relief, he found that they had come to the little

path which led through the plantation to the doctor's house.

"I think we must go down here," said Mrs. Polemont; "George always likes me to be at home when he comes in from his morning's round. Tell Linnet I shall be glad to see her any time. Perhaps she and Mrs. Plummersleigh might like to take a walk together. Mrs. Plummersleigh is a great walker."

Mr. Aubury looked at the lady, who assented by a quiet smile, nothing more.

"Thank you very much, but I am afraid Mrs. Plummersleigh will not care for the company of such a very countrified child as my little Linnet."

"I shall be quite glad," said Mrs. Plummersleigh. "I am fond of young people; and it is pleasant to have a companion in a long walk."

She said this cordially, but with no show of eagerness. She was evidently not anxious to push herself into intimacy even

with such eligible people as the master of the castle and his sister. And as Mr. Aubury shook hands with her at parting, he was conscious of a wish to become better acquainted.

CHAPTER VIII.

"A PLEASANT, gentlemanly man, is he not, Maria?" asked Mrs. Polemont, when Mr. Aubury was well out of hearing.

For, in ordinary intercourse, the two ladies called each other by their Christian names: the elder allowing it as cementing a useful intimacy which was really enjoyable to her; the younger falling into it because of a certain warm-heartedness which made her long to get rid of the "Miss" and "Mrs." when in intimate companionship with people she liked so well as this discreet, sympathetic, and convenient Mrs. Plummersleigh.

"Yes," said Maria. "I should judge so. With a short memory; for, if you remember, we dined with him at the vicarage only a fortnight after I came here, and Mrs. Flowerdale made us partners at whist afterwards."

"Ah; but, you see, that is nearly six weeks ago, and he is a man who takes so little notice of anything. Why, he has walked past me in the village over and over again, and never so much as given me a look. I expect he is always taken up with his own thoughts. And you yourself, Maria, are so very quiet at whist. It is the merest chance, if you speak a word."

"Yes. I forget whether Miss Aubury is his daughter or not."

"Then you needn't talk about other people having short memories; for I am sure I told you all about him after that dinner-party. He has never been married, and Linnet is his half-sister—full five and twenty years younger than himself, I

should say—and he does everything for her."

"Of course. Who else should do it?"

"I don't see any of course in it. It is not every half-brother who would take the entire responsibility of an orphan girl, with not a penny to bless herself with except her pension; and that would not put her to the commonest boarding-school, to say nothing of dress."

"Then why is there such a difference in their circumstances?"

"Because his mother's sister—who, of course, was nothing to Linnet—left him the castle property; and then he was already established on the coffee-plantation. And when a man gets a start like that he is all right."

"It is singular that he has never married."

"Very. Unless it is that he is so shy. I believe, if any sensible woman would help him, it might soon be brought about;

for he would make one of the best husbands in the world. I wish I knew anybody who would do for him. I am sure I would help him all I could."

Mrs. Polemont said this guilefully, because all the time she *did* know somebody suitable, and had made up her mind, too, that, so far as good-will of hers could bring it about, he should marry that somebody. But then, of course, it was necessary to throw dust into people's eyes sometimes. And, if her plans did come right, she would confess everything afterwards.

"And not for his sake only, Maria. I do feel so sorry for that poor girl, shut up amongst turnips and rabbits, and all that sort of thing, instead of amusing herself like other young people. Oh dear! if she only had a lady about her to form her manners and prepare her for society, and go into it with her."

Mrs. Plummersleigh apparently did not

find the subject interesting. They were at the end of the village now.

"Did you not say, Isabel, that we were to get some huckaback towelling before we went home? There is the shop just across the way, and it would be such a pity to have to come back on purpose."

Isabel felt a little disappointed. But then Maria was a person who did not quickly take in new ideas. And perhaps it was just as well that, as regarded what was uppermost in Mrs. Polemont's mind, she should not have any ideas at all. So the towelling was bought.

In the course of a few days Mr. Aubury called upon Mrs. Polemont and her friend. Which was not more, perhaps, than Mrs. Polemont expected, under the circumstances, had it not been that, as she remarked to Mrs. Plummersleigh, Mr. Aubury was a man from whom no one expected anything at all in the way of calls. But, what was more to the pur-

pose, he brought Linnet with him, and that, of course, was just the same as saying that he should be glad for both the ladies to go up and see them at the castle.

"I don't believe you half know what a struggle it must have been to him to do it, Maria," said Mrs. Polemont, when the call was over, and it had been arranged that they were all to have a walk together on the following day, herself and Mr. Aubury going too, for the sake of making Linnet feel not quite so much amongst strangers. "He is one of the shyest men you ever came across, and I believe that is why he has never married. Poor fellow! I do pity a man when he is shy, and yet has to go out and make calls. But he is doing it for Linnet's sake. Do you feel as if you could be kind to her, Maria?"

"Kind, Isabel?" And Mrs. Plummersleigh scarcely paused in copying out from her book a list of the women in her dis-

trict. She had been busy with it when the visitors arrived, and lost no time, after their departure, in setting to work again. "Kind? Why, of course I feel as if I could be kind to her. Why should I feel in any other way? I am sure she is simple enough."

"Oh! yes, indeed, as simple as 'Line upon Line' and 'The Peep of Day.' One can't go farther than that, as regards simplicity. But what I mean is, do you feel as if you could be *very* much interested in her?"

"I haven't begun to feel about it at all, Isabel. You know I do not easily take to fresh people."

"Well, no, perhaps not. I always said you had a great deal of caution about you. Still it would be very nice for Linnet if you *would* take kindly to her. You see, there are so few young people about here."

"I am not a young person myself," said

Maria, glancing across to the mirror, not without the faintest shadow of annoyance upon her quiet face.

"I never said you were. What Linnet needs is not so much a young person as somebody a good deal older than herself, who could be pleasant and companionable, without becoming familiar. Now I couldn't be of any use, because I have no dignity. We should get talking nonsense directly, just as if we were a couple of school-girls. If only Miss Alvisa were able to go about now!"

"Who is Miss Alvisa?"

"Maria! Talk about short memories again. And I am sure you must have heard George say, over and over again, what a peculiar case hers is. She lives at the old vicarage, that pretty house, you know, on the other side of the church. And she had an accident of some kind, and lies on her back from morning to night in the very loveliest room you ever

saw. She must be very artistic, and that sort of thing; for, if you look at the things one by one, there is nothing remarkable about them, and yet somehow the place is a perfect picture. I should like to take you to call; but she is a woman who does not care much for general society. Linnet goes to see her most days, and Mr. Aubury manages a little bit of farm-land for her. Now it would be all right if she could go about with Linnet; but of course she can't, and I should be so glad if you would take kindly to the poor girl instead."

"Does Fanny Wright live at the upper or lower end of Duke's Yard?" said Mrs. Plummersleigh, copying a fresh name from her book, and that was all the reply she made.

Isabel shrugged her shoulders.

"Maria, you are such a woman of one thing at a time."

"I am what Providence made me, Isabel."

"No, you are not. At least not here. You are what the clergyman of the parish makes you, and nothing more. You don't seem to have a wish or a purpose apart from that sort of thing. If Mr. Flowerdale told you to go and stand on the top of the church steeple for a weathercock, you would almost do it."

"I would do nothing contrary to reason, Isabel."

"I don't know. I'm sure it's contrary enough to reason to go poking on with those lists when I want to talk to you about the way in which Mr. Aubury has come out of his shell to get you to take a little notice of Linnet. Why, if it had been either of the Miss Laudervilles who had been asked to call at the castle, the whole village would have heard about it in a quarter of an hour, and here you can't think of anything but where some stupid Fanny Wright or other lives."

"I have not been asked to call anywhere, Isabel."

"You have, or, at any rate, it comes to the same thing, when Miss Aubury has called here upon you. Two cards, Maria. You can't get over that."

"Isabel, what is the use? As if I had no common-sense."

"You have plenty of common-sense, Maria, so much that you don't seem to have any to spare for things that are not common. Why, anybody gets asked to take a tract district, but anybody doesn't get asked to take a walk with Linnet Aubury. Her brother is dreadfully particular about whom she is intimate with. And you stick to that list of old women as if there was nothing else in the world."

"I have finished the list now. Is there anything else you would like to say?"

"Yes, there is. I don't like that brown straw bonnet of yours, Maria. With your

black silk dress it is simply dowdy. You ought to have myrtle green, or the very deepest navy blue. I should say navy blue, for that would bring out what warm colouring there is in your complexion. You might make yourself look very nice if you took more pains."

"But the brown straw was new only just before I came here."

"I don't care when it was new, but I do care whether it suits you or not, and I shall get George to drive me over to Broadminster this very afternoon, and I shall buy some silk and make you one myself. I won't have you going about in a thing that isn't good taste, and in a village like this, where people take so much notice."

"But," said the impenetrable Maria, carefully wiping her pen, and putting it away, "why did you not find out before that my bonnet was ugly? I wrote to

Hursley's only last week for gloves, and I could have ordered the silk as easily as not, if you had only told me."

"I am sure I don't know why I didn't. But I am quite sure of this," said Mrs. Polemont, with the air of a pretty spoiled little woman, who is accustomed to have her own way in everything, "I hate the brown straw bonnet, and you shan't put it on when we go out with Linnet Aubury to-morrow morning, if I have to sit up till midnight to make you another. I don't know how it is, but I take fits about things sometimes, and I can't be comfortable until I have altered them. Shall it be silk or terry, for to Broadminster I mean to go as soon as George can drive me?"

"Whatever you like, Isabel; I am in your hands," said Mrs. Plummersleigh, calmly.

"Very well, then, it is all right; it shall be silk, and, if it doesn't make you look ten—no, five years younger, I will engage

to wear out the ugly old brown thing for you."

And to Hursley's the little woman did go that very afternoon, and by sundown she had finished as pretty a bonnet as any lady, whose circumstances of widowhood precluded her from overmuch participation in the pomps and vanities of the world, could wish to wear.

CHAPTER IX.

THE two ladies called at the castle, and the walk was taken as arranged. Perhaps it was not unnatural, Mrs. Polemont being so much more chatty and sociable with young people than Mrs. Plummersleigh, that she should take Linnet under her own charge when they had got well out of the village, and the two were soon enjoying themselves, as Mrs. Polemont had said would be the case, like a couple of schoolgirls, while the elder branches came on at their own pace behind.

What they talked of through the fern-fringed glades of the park, and the lane

which led out from it to the moorland slopes, was probably of slight interest. Mrs. Polemont and her companion, slackening speed now and then, and dropping at random into the conversation, heard a little about the jungle scenery of Ceylon, and then a little—this from Mrs. Plummersleigh—about the difficulty of bettering the poor, and afterwards something about cathedral towns in general, and Broadminster in particular, after which there came a few remarks on shooting and deer-stalking, amusements which Mr. Aubury, though such a quiet man, thoroughly enjoyed. And then, greatly to Mrs. Polemont's satisfaction, he drew his companion's attention to a splendid cluster of wild roses which grew high up on the bank, and asked her to wait until he climbed up to gather it for her. Of course this occupied rather a long time, and, when the branch had been trimmed of its thorns and given to Mrs. Plummers-

leigh, Mrs. Polemont and Linnet were so far in advance that it was clearly useless to try to overtake them.

Nevertheless it was Maria who, when the winding road had brought them in sight of the village again, did hurry on to join Linnet; and it was Maria too, who, when something was said about following the carriage road through the park, and so lengthening the walk by nearly a mile, remarked, without the least air of disappointment or regret, that one of her boots was rather uncomfortable, and she would prefer going direct home. But still it was a very pleasant walk, and that Mr. Aubury and his sister enjoyed it was evident from the fact that they both of them said in parting that they should be very glad if, at any time when Mrs. Polemont and Mrs. Plummersleigh were out in that direction, they would come up to the castle and give Linnet the opportunity of another stroll.

"They seem quite inclined to be friendly, do they not, Maria?" said Mrs. Polemont, when they were back again in the doctor's dining-room.

"Well, yes, I daresay;" and Maria stooped to pull off the offending boot. A tight, trim, pretty little boot it was too, though Mrs. Plummersleigh manifested no consciousness of that fact as she let it swing carelessly by the loop at the back. "Linnet is rather too uncertain perhaps sometimes; she makes you uncomfortable by her shyness, and then, whilst you are trying to put her at her ease, she goes to the other extreme and almost startles you by her impulsiveness. I don't seem to have made much out of her yet."

"That is because you are so staid yourself, Maria. I don't think I ever knew anyone take things in such a matter-of-fact way as you do. And of course you notice things more when you are with girls like Linnet. I am sure it will

be all right when you know her better."

"Oh, yes, no doubt, Isabel. And, if not, it is of no consequence."

But Isabel did not assent to that.

"Maria," she said, changing the conversation, "I am so glad I insisted upon your having the navy-blue bonnet. Of all things that put me out of temper, a brown bonnet and a black silk dress do it most effectually. Just come to the glass now and see what a difference I have made in you."

Maria came, little Mrs. Polemont prancing round about her, and giving the bonnet a tilt, now up, now down, to see in which position it suited its wearer best.

"Well on your forehead, Maria, is the place for it, because it takes off from the length of your face. And now that people wear their hair down over their eyes so, one looks unfurnished with such a great piece seen at the top. You wouldn't like to take to a fringe, would you, Maria?

Or else it would become you very well, because of such a quantity of forehead."

Mrs. Plummersleigh said she was afraid the fringe would be out of place.

"Well, yes, perhaps it would. And your style so very quiet in other respects. But still, keep the bonnet well down, and you will be all right. There now, that is perfection. Maria, I told you I should make you look five years younger, and I have done it."

Mrs. Plummersleigh studied herself, or rather the bonnet, carefully, though with not at all the air of a woman to whom her personal appearance is a matter of moment. That she should look neat, and, as the phrase goes, "ladylike," was evidently all she desired. And Mrs. Plummersleigh was both.

She had a good figure, rather above than below the middle height, with a scarcity of tissue about it which, at thirty, gave the impression of slenderness. She

had an abundance of light-brown hair, which she wore neatly braided, low at the back of the head, in opposition to the then prevailing fashion of high top braids. Her forehead was a trifle too high and bald, but it showed sense. She had light eyes, very much the colour of her hair, with thick lashes of a still lighter shade, and she had a pale but evenly-tinted complexion. The little warmth of tone there was about her was well brought out by the deep blue of the bonnet, to which Mrs. Polemont was still giving alternate tilts and pokes to satisfy herself as to its most becoming position.

"I am so glad I thought of it, Maria. I shall not rest now until you have a silk dress exactly the same shade."

"Cashmere," said Maria, leaving the looking-glass, and fingering in an absent sort of way the cluster of wild-roses which Mr. Aubury had given her. "I could not

afford a silk one. It *would* make a neat costume though."

"Very well, cashmere. I don't care about the material, so long as you give in to the colour. It is your everlasting brown and black which I abominate so. Then I shall write to mamma to-night and ask her to send me patterns from Hursley's, and the first fine day next week we will drive over and see about having it made. And, Maria, something else has suggested itself to me."

"No, no," said Mrs. Plummersleigh, "I must stop at the dress. I must indeed."

"It is nothing about the dress. I have given myself trouble enough about *you*. I am going to think about somebody else now. I wonder if the Colonel's wife would mind my taking Linnet to the afternoon dance next Wednesday. You know they have lawn-tennis at the barracks every week, and once a month a little dance

after it; and Mrs. Gateforth told me I was always to bring anyone who happened to be staying with me. Linnet could go as my guest, and it would be such a treat to the poor child."

"If Mr. Aubury would approve of it," suggested Maria.

"Oh! Mr. Aubury will be all right. You know he told me how he should like her to have a little amusement of that kind. I'll get George to go over this afternoon and ask her. She is such a good-natured old thing she will be sure to say yes."

"I don't think you need ask at all, Isabel. You know Mrs. Gateforth said she should be glad to see me with you, and, as I do not intend to go, Miss Aubury can take my place without any further ceremony."

"Don't you really want to go, Maria—*really* now?"

And Mrs. Polemont, for whom an after-

noon dance was the most delightful thing in the world, except a full-dress one, looked at Mrs. Plummersleigh to see if it was possible that she meant to give up such a prospect, and to give it up so quietly, too.

"You know we *could* all go. I am sure Mrs. Gateforth wouldn't mind it one bit. She said last time she wanted more girls to dance, so many ladies went who did not care for it. So we should be all right, and it does seem such a pity to miss it."

"Never mind; it is no pity to me. As I have often said, my dancing-days are over."

"Did you like going to balls when you were younger, Maria?" said Mrs. Polemont, innocently.

"Well, it was never a *very* favourite amusement of mine, Isabel. You see, my tastes are graver. And then——"

"Yes, of course. And then, if you lived

in a quiet place, there would not be so much dancing. Mr. Aubury was talking to you about Scotland. I wonder if he knows any of your people there."

"I never asked him," said Mrs. Plummersleigh.

"No. Because, if they don't take any interest in you, there is no need for you to trouble yourself to ask about them. Only, you see, it is not a common name, and if he ever *had* met anyone."

"Scotland is a wide place," replied Mrs. Plummersleigh, with just a touch of annoyance in her voice, "and I believe he only knows it as a sportsman."

As Mrs. Plummersleigh said this, she had been pulling the leaves from her cluster of wild rose, and now, its beauty being gone, she doubled it up and put it into the waste-paper box. Mrs. Polemont looked disappointed. If her alum did deposit itself in the desired crystals upon the worsted she had so considerately

wrapped round the wire basket, it would certainly not be because the basket itself showed any anxiety to be crystallised upon. And then Maria drew on her boot, and appeared to be preparing for a second expedition.

"I think I shall go down to Mrs. Flowerdale's about Fanny Wright. I do not like that woman's behaviour at all."

"Maria! And when you would not take that extra mile just now, because you said you were tired. It is so disappointing of you."

"I did not say I was tired, Isabel. If you remember, at the time I mentioned it was my boot that inconvenienced me. My foot is quite easy now. And Mrs. Flowerdale ought to know about the woman Wright."

"Very well, go then. I don't believe you will find either of them at home, though, for I saw them both driving

across the moor in the direction of Broadminster when we were in the lane this morning. They saw us, and they did all they could to make you see them too; but Mr. Aubury was gathering that bunch of roses for you, which you have just thrown away, and so you neither of you took any notice."

"I am sure I did not, for I never saw them," replied Maria, without the least appearance of embarrassment. "And yet I don't know how it could be, for, in a general way, I am not at all short-sighted."

Which was quite true.

And then Mrs. Plummersleigh started for the vicarage, and Mrs. Polemont wrote a note to Mr. Aubury, asking him if Linnet might go with her to Mrs. Gateforth's dance on the following Wednesday afternoon, she having a sort of general invitation to take anyone who happened to be staying with her. And therefore, if Linnet would go and spend the previous part

of the day with them, they would all start together, and the doctor would see her safely home.

CHAPTER X.

MR. AUBURY and Linnet were sitting after dinner in the old chapel-room of the castle. There was just a chilly feeling about the place, Mrs. Martlet being one of those careful housekeepers who do not like to put fires, except in the back rooms, when once the spring cleaning has been carefully and laboriously accomplished. Wraps and shawls she would bring down with the greatest of pleasure, and her very choicest of cordials produce to mitigate the summer colds and damps, which are so much more disagreeable than their legitimate winter relatives; but at fires, until the first of October, she made

a dead stand. And Mr. Aubury, who hated argument, allowed her to have her way.

Rain had been falling all the afternoon. The grey stone mullions of the Gothic windows looked damp and uncomfortable. Shadows were brooding in every corner. The big yew-tree just outside, which kept the southern sun from beating too broadly in, only cast a deeper shadow now, and looked almost ghostly in its dead, black outline against the grey sky. The old chapel-room was a place which wanted fire and sunshine to warm it up, and now it had neither, it had only the young girl Linnet; and to-night she too felt dreary and out of sorts, for her brother had been so silent, more silent than was his wont, during the last few days. What he was thinking about she could not tell, only she knew that she had not grieved him, for, when he did speak to her, his voice was kinder than ever.

She turned from the window where she had been sitting in the shadow of the yew-tree.

"Shall I sing to you, brother Owen?"

"No, Linnet child. I have too much to think about."

And then he turned away from her and shut his eyes.

"I expect it is the draining of the seventeen acre," said Linnet to herself; "Martlet said it had fairly beaten him. One gets up to one's ankles in it after an hour's rain."

And then, with a desolate little shrug of her shoulders, she went back to the window, and watched the rain filling the pools on the terrace, and felt as miserable as though no sunshine would ever again chase away the dull grey mist which was over everything now.

Why of all nights in the pleasant June time should that be the rainy one? And why, just when the thoughts of

Owen Aubury were such anxious thoughts, and Linnet was in a mood which made her long for almost anything to set the stagnant waters moving again, should Mrs. Polemont's little note about the dance find its way to the castle. At another time she would not have cared about it. Bobtail was a more interesting partner than any which a ball-room was likely to provide. To chase squirrels with Snip was pleasanter exercise than walking through a quadrille; and no luncheon with Mrs. Polemont and Mrs. Plummersleigh, with lawn-tennis afterwards, even involving though it might the prettiest of new dresses for the occasion, could be half so enjoyable as a scramble through the plantation in that short blue petticoat which cleared the bobbing, wet clover heads so conveniently, and which, drag it over what gorse bushes she chose, never showed a rent. But how an afternoon's rain can alter everything, and how much may

depend upon that alteration! The doctor's boy brought the note.

"Would you like to go?" said Mr. Aubury, when he had read it aloud.

"Oh, *wouldn't* I!"

And the sudden glow on Linnet's face almost lighted up the sombre room, as she hurried away from the window and seized the dainty little note and read every word of it over again for herself.

"May I, brother Owen?"

"Oh! yes, child; write and say so. I have left my card at the mess. It is all right. If I had thought you cared for it, you should have gone when they asked us last winter. Tell Mrs. Polemont I am very much obliged to her."

And then Owen Aubury turned to his own thoughts again.

Yes, it was as Mrs. Flowerdale and the doctor's wife had hinted to him. Linnet had been pining for brightness, and change, and companionship, things natural

to every young girl as dew and sunshine to the opening flower, and he had kept them all from her; he had taken for granted that the loneliness and quietness which he needed for his own withered life, would serve for hers with all its young strength and promise. Strange that, loving her as he did, he had not thought of it sooner; strange that others should need to remind him of his duties to the girl he had promised to take thought for as his own child. He might have known it long ago, even as others had known it, but that all the time, thinking himself so good and so unselfish, he had been wrapped up in his own needs, forgetting hers.

Linnet was still reading over the note.

"And Mrs. Polemont says, brother Owen, that, if I have any preparations to make for the dance, she and Mrs. Plummersleigh are going to drive over to Broadminster to-morrow morning, to Hursley's, and I can go with them. They will call

for me about ten o'clock. Shall I say yes to that, too? Because, you know, I *must* have something pretty to go in."

"Of course, child; just whatever Mrs. Polemont thinks will be proper for you. I have no doubt she knows all about such things better than you or I."

"May it be *very* pretty?" asked Linnet, who just then, in the gloom and damp of the unwarmed room, seemed to have a new longing for something that had colour and brightness in it. "You know, I never have had a *very* pretty dress yet, and the people there are sure to be rather gay."

"Yes, as pretty as you like; and if you want one or two others, you may as well choose them at the same time, whilst you have Mrs. Polemont with you. I daresay she is more to be depended upon for such things than Mrs. Martlet."

"Oh, brother Owen, I should just think so! Mrs. Martlet says there is nothing like brown holland for a girl of my age;

and I looked so different to Mrs. Polemont when we went out walking together this morning."

"I thought you looked very nice, child; but perhaps the time has come for you to pay a little more attention to such things. Say to Mrs. Polemont how very much obliged I am that she should take so much trouble."

"And," he added, after a pause—"and Mrs. Plummersleigh too."

Linnet wrote the note. As she was doing so, a thought came into Mr. Aubury's mind—such a bright thought that it quite made a difference to the expression of his face. Had not Mrs. Flowerdale said something about the desirableness of having a lady companion or something of that sort for Linnet? Marry a wife he would not, and could not, whilst the place in his heart which a wife ought to fill was already long given to another. But a companion in the house the girl might

have, and who so suitable as Mrs. Plummersleigh? And the more Mr. Aubury thought about it, the more he felt convinced that she would be exactly the person for the position.

CHAPTER XI.

NEXT morning the rain had cleared away, the terrace-pools were dry, the June breeze blew cheerily through the open doorways of the old castle, and everything was as bright as summer sunshine could make it. After ten o'clock the two ladies arrived in the doctor's little phaeton. Of course some consultation about the all-important question of dress was necessary, and Mrs. Polemont proposed that she should make a tour of inspection through Linnet's wardrobe before deciding upon fresh purchases, leaving Mrs. Plummersleigh to be entertained meanwhile by Mr. Aubury in the garden.

"Because, Maria dear," she said, in her merrily wise way, "you always say you don't care a bit about dress and that sort of thing, and so it will only be a bore to you to go through it all. You can't think, Mr. Aubury, what trouble I have to make her get herself up fashionably enough for even a quiet little place like Abbot's Florey."

Mr. Aubury, glancing at the pretty blue bonnet, which made the black silk dress look now quite a different thing, thought that what Mrs. Plummersleigh *did* manage to accomplish in that line, was accomplished to sufficient purpose. And he had already discovered in her qualities much more important to him than the one of being able to make herself look fashionable; whilst always maintaining a ladylike appearance, it was evident, from what he had seen of her, that her thoughts found their resting-place upon a much higher level.

This quiet, unemphatic, almost colourless woman, as some people might call her, had now become an object of considerable interest to him. To note her character, her habits, her disposition in little things, was very desirable. And therefore, though certainly Mrs. Polemont did not hurry in her inspection of Linnet's company-frocks, the time appeared by no means long to Mr. Aubury as he and his companion strolled down the dingle to the swan-pools.

Mrs. Plummersleigh impressed him very favourably, the pleasantest part of that impression being that she herself apparently cared so little to produce it. Whatever else people might say about Mrs. Polemont's friend, they could not say that she was a pushing woman. Did Mr. Aubury express his fondness for a country life? she did not immediately rush into raptures over turnips and mangel-wurzels. Did he ask her opinion of Abbot's Florey? she did not hasten to assure him that nothing

could please her better than to spend the rest of her days there. Did he turn the conversation in the direction of his young sister, and hint what an advantage it would be to her to have the companionship of some amiable and sensible woman? Mrs. Plummersleigh did not straightway jump to the conclusion that that woman must needs be herself, and manifest a pleased self-consciousness accordingly. No; she was simply courteous, and only listened to what he said with just enough interest to prevent him from feeling that she was bored.

In fact that half hour's walk round the swan-pools, whilst Mrs. Polemont was deciding what sort of trimming Linnet should have upon the batiste which she was to wear at the afternoon dance, caused Mr. Aubury to make up his mind on a much more momentous question, namely, whether or not he should, at the earliest convenient opportunity, ask Mrs. Plummers-

leigh to assume the position of lady-companion to his sister, assuming with it the hospitalities of the castle, and the responsibility of accompanying Linnet to such mild gaieties in Broadminster and the neighbourhood as were suitable to her age. And he decided to do so.

But first of all he would talk over the matter with Miss Alvisa Clerehart, and for that there was no better time than the present, when the three ladies had started for their shopping expedition to Mr. Hursley's. Accordingly, when he had seen them safely through the castle keep, he set off to the old house by the church.

If ever there was any sunshine outside, it came into the room where Miss Alvisa had been lying from morning to night for the last ten years; and if there was none outside, she made it for herself in that calm, quiet, ceaseless well-doing which had long ago become the habit of her life. Both now, sunshine from with-

out and sunshine from within, told their story in the face which Owen Aubury kissed with a lover's kiss, as he bent over Miss Clerehart's sofa that summer morning.

With a lover's kiss. For those two should have been husband and wife many and many a year ago, if what the world calls chance had not come between them.

It was Miss Alvisa to whom he had told the story of his love, as they two strolled through that bit of fir plantation on the old duke's preserves. And it was the memory of her low-spoken reply which would make that bit of fir plantation fairer, right on to the end of his life, than all the purple mountains and blossomy jungles and glowing skies of Ceylon. But he was young in those days, and Alvisa was younger, though they had known for long that they loved each other. And Alvisa's mother was of a proud sort, being related in a distant way to nobility

itself, one of her relations having married into the family of the Duke of Moreland, and she was not minded that her only child should change her maiden estate without at the same time fitting improvement of it. And so, though Owen was doing fairly well on that coffee plantation, and though, when he won Alvisa's promise amongst the whispering fir-trees, he could have taken her out to a home pleasant enough, Mrs. Clerehart decided that he must go alone, and in three years, a wealthy man she hoped, come home to fetch his bride.

Which he did; and, only a week before he arrived, that cruel accident happened which had left her a helpless and hopeless cripple.

That was why Owen Aubury had never married; that was why, when old Miss Goodenough died, he took to the castle farm and settled down to his quiet life there, instead of going out again to the

coffee plantation. Little was left to him now, but that little was very dear. Better that quiet kiss, exchanged day by day between him and that pale-faced invalid, than the love and caresses of any other woman; better to minister to her needs, even in such poor fashion as social conventions would allow, than to be ministered unto by the most eligible of the numerous wives whom Abbot's Florey in its match-making anxiety would so willingly have selected for him at any time during these ten years past.

And the bitterness of Owen Aubury's life was that he had come home too late; that the good store of silver and gold which came to him now, season by season, from the plenty-dropping boughs of those eastern groves, had been bought by a year of added work which, had he only spent it in coming home, would have given him the wife he had waited for so long. How little would all that suffering have seemed

to her, could he only have had the right to care for her through it, could his arm have been the arm to uphold, and his strength the strength to support, and his love, none coming between them, the love to cherish, and his the right to stay for help, and comfort, and blessing, where now he only came and went, a passing guest!

But they had long ago given up talking about these things. They had sunk into their place amongst the countless might have beens of men's and women's lives—that dead sea over which the trafficking of the present goes to and fro, what lies beneath it only remembered sometimes. And now, except for that kiss daily exchanged between them—mute symbol of a faith steadfastly held through all the best years of their lives—there was no sign. They were as friends most dear and pleasant to each other, but only friends.

And very convenient indeed for Miss

Clerehart to have such a friend, Mr. Aubury being so dependable a man of business, and the farm-land of the castle and the old vicarage lying so closely together that he could overlook the two almost as well as one. And very agreeable for him, too, to have such companionship, Miss Clerehart being without exception the most intelligent, cultivated woman in the place; such a woman, indeed, as any man might be proud to count amongst his friends, though perhaps a trifle too exclusive in her devotion to intellectual pursuits, and not in conversation so spiritually-minded as could be desired of a person in her weak state of health.

That was what the people of Abbot's Florey said of it, and knew no more than they said.

CHAPTER XII.

MISS ALVISA was making a little etching for the conclusion to a set of illustrations to a child's story-book. It was a lake, with the sun setting over the mountains which girded it in. A boat, with sail spread, hovered in the track of brightness which shimmered across the waves. In the foreground was a wayside cross, such as one sees set for rest and prayer among the olive-trees of northern Italy; and just alighting on the cross was a little bird, ready, ere twilight fell, to sing its evening song, and then be at peace in the shady covert of the woods, which already lay in shadow along the margin of

the lake. A pleasant picture, full of the quiet which Miss Alvisa had translated into it out of her own thoughts.

She was yet pondering what finishing touches she could add, when, looking up, she saw Owen Aubury passing the window, whose curtain drawn back told him there was a welcome waiting him. And a minute or two afterwards he came in, with the perplexed look of a man who has important matters to settle, and knows not how to settle them.

"Is it the land, Owen?" she said, smiling up to him with a calm as bright as that of the little picture which had grown under her fingers. "I am afraid that seventeen-acre is a troublesome portion to you. Martlet told me this morning it was nothing but a swamp again."

"It is not the land, Alvisa," and Owen Aubury stooped over her and kissed her. "It is Linnet."

"What about Linnet? Is she ill?"

"No; the child is well enough, as far as health goes. But I am a fool to have thought that things could go on quietly and never change. I suppose I ought to have found that out long ago, but I am as contented as ever I hope to be in this world, and I expected she was the same."

Mr. Aubury said this with just a touch of bitterness, which Miss Alvisa had never noticed before, either in voice or manner.

"And Linnet *is* content," she said; "nay, I believe she is a great deal more than content—she is happy."

"Then she is more than I am. But she is not happy, Alvisa, and she is not content either; and, as I said before, I am a fool not to have found it out long ago."

"Are you sure you have found it out rightly now?"

"Yes, a girl of Linnet's age wants something more than a good-tempered horse and a middle-aged brother to make her

happy, even though the horse will walk at her heels like a pet dog all day long, and the brother is ready to do the same when Bobtail has gone to his stable. Linnet wants somebody who can think her own thoughts, and neither Bobtail nor I can do that; and she wants some one who can give her her own share of what is going on in life, and I cannot do that, either."

"And why not? What is there worth having in life that is kept from Linnet?"

"A great many things that I never thought of before. A girl of eighteen wants companionship and change of society, and to go to dances, and all that sort of thing."

"Nay—there, Owen, you are wrong. Remember, only last Christmas, when my cousin was staying here, and I asked you if you thought Linnet would like to go with her to the county ball, because, if so, I could get her an invitation; and to see

the way she laughed at me for even proposing it."

"Yes; but that was well on to a year ago. And, somehow, the want of this sort of thing seems to come suddenly into a girl's life. You fancy she is contented with the old ways, and Bobtail, and Snip, and the middle-aged brother; and then, before you have time to think where you are, you find she has shot ahead of you, and wants a woman's amusements and a woman's interests, and everything else that comes into a woman's life."

"And how did you find it all out?"

"Well, it had been dawning upon me in a dim sort of way, and last night she seemed unusually dull and quiet; and in the midst of it there came a note from Mrs. Polemont, asking her to go with them to the afternoon dance at the barracks next week. And if you had but seen how she brightened up at the thought of it! how delighted she was when I told

her she might go! It all came clearly enough to me then. Of course it is only natural she should care for such things; all girls do more or less. She is growing up into a woman, and I am giving her no chance of living a woman's life."

"And how do you propose to mend that?"

"Well, of course, I can't go about with her. I ought to have a lady in the house who would enable her to see a little of society, and all that sort of thing."

Miss Alvisa looked long and steadily at him. A new light was beginning to dawn upon her, too. But she made no sign. She only looked at the little picture before her, so full of peace; the calm light over the hills, the boat in the sunshine's track, the bird on the cross, ready for its even-song; and it seemed to her that all might be changed now. Owen Aubury was leaning forward, his elbows on his knees,

his head upon his hands, and his face was partly turned from her.

"Owen, you must lay the past away, and marry a wife and be content."

He flashed his eyes to hers for a moment, then flashed them away again.

"I shall never do that, Alvisa. A man can live his life but once. I have lived mine."

"In one sort of way, Owen, a man can live his life but once. But there are more ways of living than one, and living worthily too."

"*You* say, Alvisa, I ought to marry?"

"Yes."

"You are tired of seeing me come every day?"

"Tired? Well, we will not talk of that. We will only talk of what ought to be done."

"I can't love two women, Alvisa; and I love you. That is enough."

"You can't love another woman, perhaps, just as you love me, but you have far more to spend in the power of making some one happy than you can spend upon me. And the days will come when such a woman will be able to do more for you than you think now."

"The days will never come, Alvisa, when any woman will be to me what you have been."

Miss Alvisa set her lips together. It was only "have been," then. He went on—

"As I said before, I am as content now as I am ever likely to be. It is not my duty to marry any woman for the mere sake of being made comfortable by her, and it is not my duty, either, to marry for the sake of making Linnet comfortable. I think perhaps it might be my duty to have some pleasant, intelligent lady in the house as a companion for her. But to marry the lady—no indeed!"

"I am afraid, Owen, when once the arrangement is made, Abbot's Florey will give you very little rest until you *do* marry her."

"In that case, then, one could but go back to the old ways. And, besides, I have been blind not to see it before, but one of these days Linnet will be leaving me, and then I shall not want a companion for her."

"No, you will want one for yourself."

Owen Aubury looked at her, but doubtfully. There was a want of something, though the words of his reply were tender enough. He said, holding himself quietly apart from her,

"Alvisa, stop. Since I came home ten years ago, and found you lying here helpless, and, as you call yourself, good for nothing, you have been better to me than the brightest, and fairest, and strongest woman that I could have chosen out of all the world to be my wife. It has been

more to me—God knows it has!—to come here and hold your hand, and look into your eyes, and have you look into my heart through mine, than if I had had any other to cherish at my own fireside. I have never even wished for any other to be to me what I once thought you would have been. Will you not believe this was true?"

"Yes," said Alvisa, "it *was*."

If Owen Aubury could have caught her meaning then, if he could have perceived the little undertone of pain in the lingering upon that last word "was," all might have been different. But he let it pass.

"Then why do you speak to me so?"

"Because," said the brave-hearted woman, not letting so much as a tear force its way into her eyes, as now, with her own free will, she put away, believing he wished it so, the one most precious thing in her life, and put it away so that he should rather think her love was failing,

than have the greater bitterness of feeling that she mistrusted him—"because I want you to think differently, and to let some other sunshine into your life, which may warm it as mine never can."

Owen Aubury turned away, full of thought. He was facing a new trouble. There fell a long pause between them, between these two who had hitherto spoken out to each other every thought and purpose of their lives. In that pause the woman was doing what women have done before for the men they loved best, taking her love and laying it out of sight, and letting the loved one think it was not so much after all. And the man was doing what also many a man has done, vexing himself with the thought that what he has given so faithfully is misprized, struggling to believe that it is better so, and winning with that belief a feeling of hardness which will make him trust all other women a little less.

Truly Owen Aubury had given faithfully and kept loyally the promise of so many years ago. And to keep it had not been hard to him. The time had seemed but a few days for the love he bore her. Now the thought crept into his heart that Alvisa Clerehart had not set that love so high as it deserved. And with that thought came another, which often steps closely enough behind disappointed trust, injuring the mind which gives it entrance even more fatally than any disappointment can—the thought that he had done nobly, and she unworthily: the little touch of self-praise which makes all self-sacrifice useless. And for a few minutes these two thoughts told their story in his face.

That was the one time, the one single solitary time in all these ten years, that Owen Aubury had by so much as look or word or tone given sign that the loneliness he was bearing for Alvisa's sake was too heavy a burden. And it was but a

little sign now; yet clear, distinct as the point of a diamond, it drew its mark across the pure crystal of their love. To Alvisa, with senses quickened by those years of suffering, it was as the beginning of the end. She read her own meaning in that look of weariness upon his face. It was waiting for her, waiting with no hope of better days to come, that had brought it there. It bound her to loose his prison doors and let him go forth. And it bound her to loose them in such wise that blame, if blame there were, should fall only upon herself.

"Owen," she said, "it is time you were free."

Mr. Aubury turned and looked her steadily in the face.

"Alvisa, are you saying that for your own sake, or for mine?"

"I am saying it for both of us, Owen."

He turned away again, this time not looking towards the sunlight any more as

it struck bravely through the beech-tree boughs outside—the beech-tree boughs beneath whose shade he and Alvisa had once exchanged such sweet words of love —but burying his face in his hands, that she might not see the wound she had given him. Nevertheless, just then she, calm-eyed, pale, silent, with face upturned bravely towards the day, was the more blessed of the two, no thought of herself, but only of the man she loved so truly, having leave to stir within her.

"Well, good-bye, Alvisa," he said, after a while, taking her hand and stooping over her for the usual farewell kiss. Nay, this time it was not the usual one; there was almost the bitterness of death in it. It seemed to seal the solemn barrier which had just been raised between them and the enduring, noble patience of the past ten years. "Good-bye, Alvisa. But I shall come and see you again soon."

She made a slight involuntary gesture

with her hand, as though bidding something aside.

"Oh, yes, of course. You must just come as usual. There are always so many things for us to arrange. I know there was something I wanted to ask you this morning, only I am not able to recollect it. There has been so much more to think about."

And with that she let him go away.

"But I shall never do as she tells me —never," he said to himself, as slowly and sadly, and with a world of regretful thoughts in his heart, he turned from her into the darkness, out of which there seemed no way for him now.

CHAPTER XIII.

BUT he had scarcely crossed over the little bit of foot-road into the dingle, when he returned, not, however, entering the house again, but pausing at the open window under which her sofa was placed. Still the curtain was drawn back. There was his welcome, but how different now!

"I had forgotten something too, Alvisa. I meant to have asked you what you had decided about that little corner of land at the end of your pasture—the piece, you know, which Leebury wants to rent. I should let him have it, if I were you. You have as much as you want without it."

Mr. Aubury said this in a cheerful,

business-like way. It was better to let Miss Alvisa see that what had taken place would not make any difference to the kindly understanding which subsisted between them on all ordinary affairs. What he could do to help her in such affairs he would do still, come what might.

And that she could meet him in the same frank, pleasant way was evident from her reply.

"Oh! yes, the land at the other end of the pasture. By all means let him have it. And do not be hard upon him about rent; it is a matter of little importance. He might have it for nothing, only that would not be so good for him."

"No. What is worth having at all is worth paying for. And have you remembered what you were going to ask me?"

"Yes; it came into my head before you were across the road. I want you to let Martlet give Blackamoor a trot now and then, so as to get him into riding order

before Keith comes. You know, the long vacation begins in a week or two, and I expect him down here for awhile."

"Oh! Keith Moriston, your Airdrie Muir shepherd lad, as you used to call him. So he is coming, is he?"

"Yes. He has always managed before to get a tutorship on the Continent for the long vacation, and he wanted to do it this time; but he has been working very hard lately, because he was so anxious to take honours, and the doctors tell him he must have perfect rest. I don't think he will get that better anywhere than here."

"No; the place is quiet enough. How is he getting on? Not going to be double first, I am afraid."

"No. You see, mathematics are not in his line; he always had more taste for literature, and in that I think he will do well."

"What are you going to make of him?"

"Just what he is able to make of him-

self. I open the door of everything by giving him a good education. He must find his own way forward after that. At any rate, he is working as if he knew there was nothing for it *but* work."

"And quite right too. He would not be good for much, if he idled away his time whilst you are stinting yourself to keep him at college. You never say anything about it, Alvisa, but I am sure you must get tired sometimes of etching and translating."

There were other things Mr. Aubury thought of just then, which he had hoped might have been more precious to her than etching and translating, and of which she had also tired. But he would not bring up that matter again. And there was nothing in his manner to make Miss Alvisa think he cherished any bitterness for what had been said. Rather, he was, if possible, more friendly and obliging than usual, as though almost pressing

upon her notice his acceptance of the changed relation between them.

"Tired! No," she said, "I am not tired. Indeed it is far better to have something to work for than only to work to put off the time. Keith has done well so far, with scholarships and prizes. There was really but little for me to make up last year. Then I have a good hope that he will get a professorship out in India before long. The English literature chair in the Calcutta University will be vacant some time after Christmas, and I know Keith has been mentioned as likely for it, that being the department to which he has given most attention. But one may work, and wait, and hope, and it may come to nothing after all."

"I hope not," said Mr. Aubury, not letting himself think that the words might apply to herself rather than to the shepherd laddie. "If young Moriston is clever and persevering, he is sure to get

on. It is a pity he is so shy. I remember he wouldn't come over to see us at the castle for all I could say to persuade him last Christmas, but that is better than the other extreme, when one considers what he has sprung from. People would perhaps be more ready to remind him of it, if he appeared to forget it himself."

"Keith never will do that, though the world will, I believe, one day, and society too. But I wanted to ask you, Owen, to show him a little kindness this time. I am afraid he may find the time hang rather heavily here, alone with me."

"I will show him as much as ever you like, Alvisa. I am sure I shall not show him more than I feel; for I like the little I have seen of him, and I wish it had been more. I got him to go riding out with me two or three times last Christmas, but to the house I could *not* get him. Perhaps he will be a little more sociable this time. Tell him there is very good fishing down

at the swan-pools, and he is welcome to try it whenever he likes, without waiting for an invitation. I daresay, being of the quiet sort, he will like that as well as anything else. And if he likes to come into the house any time, and have a spell of reading in the library, why, the books are there ready for him."

"Thank you very much. And you will not forget Blackamoor."

"No; it will do him no end of good to carry old Martlet to Broadminster and back every day for the next fortnight, and I will see that he does it. I think I will be going now. And Leebury is to have the bit of land at his own rent. Let me see, is there anything else?"

"No, thank you. You are very good about Keith."

"Not at all. I like the young fellow, and so it will be a pleasure to me to do anything for him. I shall be coming over again before long, but be sure you send

me word, if there is anything you want. Now good-bye again."

Mr. Aubury dropped the curtain, which he had been holding back as he leaned upon the window-sill, talking to Miss Alvisa. And then, with a quiet smile and a wave of the hand, he crossed the lawn again, and was soon out of sight amongst the trees by the swan-pools.

When he was gone, Miss Alvisa lay still for a little while, with her eyes shut. Then she took up the picture upon which she had been working so busily only a couple of hours before. With a few touches she altered the whole expression of it. When it was finished, the little bird lay, with broken wing, dead, near the cross on which it had alighted to sing its evening song. A shadow, creeping down from the mountain, had almost hidden the white-sailed boat in its blackness. No track of sunshine lay any longer across the ripples of the lake. Clouds, heavy

with tempest, were rolling up in the distance. The reeds by the water's edge crowded together, and the long willow-branches shivered at the first breath of the coming storm. All the story was of change and unrest.

"That will do," she said to herself. "Yet one has only to wait, and it will have passed away."

CHAPTER XIV.

THEN she wrote a long, cheery letter to Keith Moriston, bidding him get away from Balliol as soon as he could, and come to the old vicarage for a complete holiday.

Keith Moriston was an orphan lad whose parents had been cottars on the estate of Lord Stormont, at Airdrie Muir, in the south of Scotland. When they died he was "taken to" by his mother's people, cottars also on the same estate, and was tending sheep there when Miss Alvisa Clerehart, staying, before her accident, with some friends in the neighbourhood, used to meet him, then a bright-

eyed lad of thirteen, sitting with his books amidst the tufts of heather, spelling through a tattered copy of Shakespeare, which the village school-master had lent him. Miss Clerehart, watching him day by day, and having long talks with him as he counted his flocks on the braeside, made up her mind that he was intended for better things than the keeping of sheep; and, after taking counsel with her friends, and his too, determined to send him to the High School of Edinburgh, pledging herself, if he proved himself worthy, to help him through his college course, and do what she could towards establishing him afterwards in some occupation more suited to his tastes. He did so well at the High School that, leaving it, he took away enough in bursaries to support him at Balliol, with very little additional help from Miss Alvisa. And his career hitherto had been such as to give her hope that she had done well

in depriving Lord Stormont of one of his most trustworthy little shepherd laddies.

Not that Keith Moriston, now a young man of three and twenty, was at all of the active, energetic sort to make a figure in the world. He was good-looking, of the genuine Scottish build, tall, broad, ruddy of face, with dark hair tangling over a forehead which showed room enough for any quantity of brain; but there was an amount of physical inertia about him, a leisureliness, not to call it by a stronger name, which, by those who did not know his intellectual activity, might well be taken for a barrier against probable success.

Mrs. Flowerdale so took it. Mrs. Flowerdale had a son of her own at Balliol, who was putting the vicar to the full expenses of his university education, not having won either scholarships or prizes, though for one or two he had run young Moriston rather closely. Mrs.

Flowerdale hoped he would run him still more closely in the matter of that Calcutta professorship, young Percy having no leaning towards the Church, and the Bar being too risky for a youth who had as yet done nothing which could with exactitude be called brilliant. Besides, they had friends, not connected with the college, who could put in a word for him, and, after all, interest did a good deal in an Indian appointment, so that Mrs. Flowerdale had strong hopes that Percy would be sent out.

Perhaps the fact that the fulfilment of her own hopes would involve the disappointment of Miss Alvisa Clerehart's, infused a little acid into her feelings towards that lady. One naturally feels that one has justice on one's own side, and as naturally one credits the other side with the opposite. And if Mrs. Flowerdale ever spoke out at all about it,—which she did sometimes to Mrs. Polemont, the vicar never allowing her to enter upon the subject

with himself,—it was to say that she thought Miss Alvisa had done very foolishly in lifting a young man out of his own position, and thrusting him amongst gentlemen; and, for her own part, she should think it a lesson to them both if the Secretary of State for India passed over young Moriston altogether. She had said this once in Mrs. Plummersleigh's presence, and Mrs. Plummersleigh had quite agreed with her, saying there was nothing she disliked so much as seeing young men of low birth pushed in amongst their superiors. And she added that, if ever she herself met Mr. Moriston, she should, whilst treating him with politeness for Miss Clerehart's sake, still give him to understand that there were certain boundary lines in good society, which young men of his origin would do well not to overpass.

For Mrs. Plummersleigh paid great attention to what Mrs. Flowerdale said.

And Mrs. Flowerdale, on her side, respected Mrs. Plummersleigh as a woman of unusual discretion, tact, and common sense, though perhaps more silent than was necessary about her friends and connections.

It had been arranged, before Linnet went to the dance, that Mrs. Polemont and Mrs. Plummersleigh should stay at the castle on their way home, and have a quiet dinner, the doctor having unexpectedly gone some distance on a professional consultation. This arrangement was carried out, Mrs. Polemont also allowing Mr. Aubury to send the little phaeton away, as he said it would give him great pleasure to walk home himself with the ladies. Linnet walked with them too, for the sake of returning afterwards with her brother, the moon being then at the full, and the walk from the doctor's house, along the foot-road, past the dingle to the swan-pools at the bottom of the castle farm,

one of the prettiest in Abbot's Florey.

Naturally they fell into couples, little Mrs. Polemont, always brisk and active, and ready to take the lead in anything, going on first with Linnet, leaving Mrs. Plummersleigh to Mr. Aubury, who was, of course, not unwilling to avail himself of this further opportunity to become acquainted with the lady who he hoped by-and-by would become a resident in his house. He had already taken advantage of a little quiet conversation after dinner, to ascertain from Mrs. Polemont that her friend had no plans or purposes extending beyond this visit to Abbot's Florey; that, if she happened to hear of any engagement similar to the one which she had for the past eight or nine years filled so conscientiously in Mr. Fledborough's house at Broadminster, she should be not unwilling to accept it; and that the village, so far, had suited her health remarkably well; better, in fact, than she could have ex-

pected from its close vicinity to Broadminster, where she suffered almost incessantly from neuralgia.

Upon which very satisfactory information, Mr. Aubury had remarked, with a pleasant smile, that he hoped she might be induced to make Abbot's Florey a permanent residence.

Mrs. Polemont did not quite know what that meant, but she thought it looked remarkably like the alum settling upon the basket. And it was to give it a chance of depositing itself still more successfully that she tripped off with Linnet before Mr. Aubury, who might perhaps have felt bound in politeness to do it, had had time to offer his own escort.

That same evening Mr. Flowerdale and his wife were dining quietly with the Miss Laudervilles, and it so fell out—though whether for better or worse no one could tell—that, returning home in the moon-

light, they saw, a little in advance of them, the castle party on their way to the doctor's house. And, moreover, they saw that Mrs. Plummersleigh was walking behind with Mr. Aubury, and that he had offered his arm to her.

"Shall we hurry on a little and join them?" said the vicar's wife. "You know you said you wanted to see Mr. Aubury about a subscription for that clothing-club."

"Not a bit of it, Laura," replied Mr. Flowerdale.

"But indeed you did, Percy, and only yesterday, too. And, as he is walking with a lady, perhaps he will not like to refuse."

"Laura, my dear, what a mean advantage to take! No, if Mr. Aubury is walking behind with Mrs. Plummersleigh, he is doing it for his own pleasure, and not for my convenience. I should have

thought, Mrs. Vicar, that you were a clever enough woman to have found that out for yourself."

"Percy, you don't mean to say——"

"I don't mean to say anything at all, Laura," replied Mr. Flowerdale, afraid that he might have gone too far with a woman of such an inquiring disposition as his wife; "so just you be quiet now. All I say is, that two are company, and three are none, so I shall not go across and interrupt them."

"Very well. And it was Mrs. Plummersleigh, was it not, that he was gathering the bunches of roses for, whilst Mrs. Polemont and Linnet were ever so far on before?"

"The very same, my dear. How you women do pick up things!"

"Percy! I didn't pick up anything at all. I know my place as a clergyman's wife too well to go about picking up things. It was you who first put it into

my head by saying that we ought not to hurry up and join them."

"Well, we will go, if you like, Laura."

"Oh! dear no, not on any account. I know very well what it means when one must not interrupt a lady and gentleman who are walking arm in arm ever so far behind their companions. Though, at the same time, Percy, I quite believe you have lost a good subscription by it. Under the circumstances, Mr. Aubury would not have minded how much he gave you."

"Well, Laura, just be discreet about it, and don't say anything."

"Percy! How *can* you? As if I went gossiping about like that quicksilvery little Mrs. Polemont. I do consider it my place to know what is going on in the parish, but it is not my place to talk about it. If he should be thinking of anything of that kind, what an awkward thing it will be for poor Linnet."

"There you go again, Laura. Who ever

said that he was thinking of anything of the kind? But, if he is, I'll venture to say he is doing it more for Linnet's sake than his own."

"You don't say so. What simpletons men must be then. Do you think, Percy, he will make any provision for her, being only his half-sister? You see, if he married, and had a family of his own, it would make all the difference."

"So it would. Only we have to find out first that he *is* thinking of anything of the kind. Don't you think that younger Miss Lauderville ages very much, Laura?"

"Percy, I am not going to be put off. I believe you know something about it that you won't tell me. Have you been having any conversation with Mr. Aubury?"

"My dear," replied the entangled vicar, "I have conversations with Mr. Aubury nearly every day of my life, and I don't

know that he ever mentioned Mrs. Plummersleigh's name to me; there then. Now let us change the subject."

"Really, Percy, how you do snap one up! I suppose one has just as much right to talk about Mr. Aubury as one has to talk about anyone else."

"Of course, my dear, just as much. And you have just as much right to take for granted that he is going to marry Mrs. Plummersleigh, which is no right at all."

"Well, Percy, all I can say about it is, that you first put the idea into my mind by making such a difficulty about interrupting them. If you had gone across at once without any fuss, I should never have given another thought to it."

"Then don't give another thought to it now, Laura, my dear," said the excellent vicar, who, however, with all his excellence, was not wide-awake enough to see that

that was the very way to make his wife think all the more, and perhaps say what she thought too.

CHAPTER XV.

BLACKAMOOR was looked up according to promise, and put upon a somewhat shorter allowance of diet; and for about a fortnight before the long vacation commenced he might have been seen trotting to and fro between Abbot's Florey and Broadminster, with good Martlet's fifteen stone of combined muscle and respectability safely mounted on the back of him.

"And, Martlet, I should like to know what that may be for," said the old housekeeper, as her husband, on his new steed, halted at the back-kitchen door for a draught of home-brewed, before starting

down the dusty road. "As if the master hadn't plenty of his own, and the brown mare eating her head off this three months past, and Gypsy as fat while it's as much as her skin can do to hold it in. There's no need for folks on this place to go a-borrowing just yet, I should say."

"It's Miss Alvisa's young man," said Martlet, stolidly; "him as comes from what-d'ye-call-it, where he gets his learning. And the master give me orders as Blackamoor was to be got ready for him."

"Oh! Mr. Moriston. Ay, I remember him last year. He'd used to go about a good bit with the master outside. Not that he ever comed in, though. He don't look the sort as sets theirselves easily at other folk's tables. And so Blackamoor's a-getting ready for *him*."

"Yes; and I don't know whether there's more behind. The master was saying something to Miss Linnet when we was all three out over the seventeen acre,

about having a bit more company to the place, and the linen and things looked over. But, as it wasn't anything as belonged to the land, I didn't take heed."

"Nor hadn't need to, Martlet. It's a deal you know about a tablecloth, whether it's damask or whether it's hemp, so long as you've a bit of something savoury set on top of it. But, if there's linen to be looked to, it's myself that ought to be spoke to in time, and I wonder the master hasn't done it. You didn't happen to hear nothing no more?"

"No, nor didn't watch for it. That's a good tap, Betsey, as good as ever you and me brewed betwixt us, and it'll set me finely on to Broadminster. This is the sort of day one wants a drop o' something cool to wet his whistle."

And, wiping the froth from the stubbly three days' growth on his upper lip, Martlet jogged cheerily away, under the

keep and up the straight turnpike road to Broadminster.

But the stores of damask and homespun linen in that big old oaken chest on the front landing were not disturbed so often that Mrs. Martlet should fail to know the why and the wherefore, if anything was going to be done to them now. And her opportunity fell out before long. The very next morning, which was about a week after the dance at Broadminster, there were greengages to preserve; and Miss Linnet, concerning whom the master had given orders that she should understand what was fitting in matters domestic, must be taught to do them.

Accordingly, when the roomy front kitchen had been made as clean as a new pin, and Tidy, the housemaid, was busy with the upstairs work, so that Mrs. Martlet had a clear course before her, she brought out her sugar, and her fruit, and her scales, and fetched Miss Linnet in

from the dingle, where she had been fishing for pike in the swan-pools.

"Not as I would have disterved you myself, Miss Linnet," she said, seeing that the girl took with a somewhat bad grace to the weighing of the sugar into the great brass pan, and to the careful turning over, one by one, of the greengages, which were just beginning to "give," as Mrs. Martlet called it, in their own separate pan over the clear fire, "but it was the master himself's wish that you should see it from first to last, and greengages isn't a thing I ever take in hand over once in a season. Besides, if you don't gather them dry with the sun on, and before the wasps has begun to help themselves, you may as well never gather them at all."

"And we could get them off the trees, which would be a great deal nicer," said Linnet, baring her beautiful round white arms to stir the sugar, which was just set on. In vain Mrs. Martlet assured her

that it did not want stirring at that early stage of the process, that, in fact, there was nothing to stir until it had begun to melt at the bottom of the pan.

"Then why on earth did you put a spoon in?" said Linnet, quitting it with a look of disgust. "But never mind; the greengages want something doing to them, I am sure."

And, with a plunge to the other side of the fire, Linnet seized a second spoon, which she thrust with all the vigour of her young health and strength into the softening yellowy-green fruit before Mrs. Martlet, panting and astonished, could lay hands upon her.

"Miss Linnet! Miss Linnet! And them to be preserved whole in halves, and at the very point now for a touch to bruise them. There then, if you haven't been and gone and done it, and made them all into a mash!"

"I don't care, Mrs. Martlet. I'm sure

something must want stirring. And I haven't bruised more than half a dozen of them. I will pick them out, if you like ?"

"Then, Miss Linnet, I don't like. No, you'd best leave them, now the mischief's done. And just you watch this sugar now, and, as the scum rises, take it off into this here basin, which I've set for it, as long as there's any to take. I shall need to go and fetch the book; for it's jam we shall have to make them into, now you've broken them so, and whether you put as much sugar in for jam I wouldn't like to say without being sure. Oh dear, oh dear! But you'll mind the scum, Miss Linnet?"

"Yes, yes," said Linnet, taking out one of the spoilt halves and eating it. "As long as there is anything to stir, you may depend upon me to stir it."

Mrs. Martlet dropped her broad hands helplessly by her sides. Did ever a girl have so little idea about anything ?

"Miss Linnet, if you put a spoon to that sugar at the present moment, you'll ruin everything. It's the scum that has to rise, and as it rises you've got to take it carefully off."

"And pour it over the greengages?"

"No, Miss Linnet," said Mrs. Martlet, with dignity, "*not* over the greengages."

"Then may I eat it? With that little bit of butter you put at the bottom of the pan, it ought to taste exactly like toffee."

"You may do what you like, Miss Linnet. I'm not the woman to go out of my place to give instructions."

"Oh! come, Mrs. Martlet," and Linnet went and stroked down the old lady's rough, red cheeks as tenderly as she would have touched the fur of a little young rabbit; "I didn't mean to vex you. There is no harm in saying that syrup tastes like toffee."

"No, honey," said Mrs. Martlet, appeased, and kissing the soft hand as it came

over her lips, "only there's a respect that's proper to fruit like this, and when you've the very best of loaf-sugar to it likewise. I had set my heart upon them greengages being a pattern, and every half as clear as you mightn't have been ashamed for the Duke of Moreland's own cook to see them. Not that I should ever be ashamed of my preserves being shown at the park, but, being a duke, one naturally expects everything of the best; and now to think of its being only jam."

"Never mind, Mrs. Martlet. It will be very good jam, I am sure."

"No, it won't, Miss Linnet, if you stand over it and let the scum rise in that way."

"Oh, dear! I forgot. What a pity!"

And down went the spoon to the very bottom of the syrup, which was just now simmering delightfully—went down with a stir as vigorous as all Linnet's good-will could make it.

"Oh, Miss Linnet, Miss *Linnet!*" said

the housekeeper, with a despairing groan. "As if I hadn't told you over and over again that to meddle with it on the simmer was to ruin it! That syrup will be as thick as thick can be now. And the very best of sugar—I couldn't have got better if I'd gone down on my bended knees to the grocer."

"Oh, *bother* the syrup!" said Linnet, beginning to lose patience. "I don't care if it's as thick as a London fog. I'll go and catch pike again. There *is* some fun in that."

"Yes, Miss Linnet, and when it comes to the winter-time, and the puff tarts you're so fond of, I wonder where they'd be."

"They would be in the store-room, Mrs. Martlet, as right as possible, so long as you yourself were in the kitchen. You and puff tarts go together as naturally as sage and onions, or beans and bacon. And, what is more, they would be the

best puff tarts in the world if you had had anything to do with them. There, then, now don't go and scold me again."

"Eh, Miss Linnet, honey, but I don't think there was ever another like you for coming round over anyone. It's little scolding you'd ever get from me, if it wasn't that the master himself said so particular that everything proper in a house you had ought to learn, and I'm sure I'm doing my best to teach you. But if it had been anybody else that had tried me so, I don't know that I could have kept my hands off her. To put a spoon to the bottom of the syrup when it's just on the simmer! Did ever anybody hear!"

"It shan't happen again, Mrs. Martlet. I wish preserves could be done in the winter-time, when it doesn't seem such a shame to stop in the house to look after them. Or, better still, I wish one never had to learn to make them at all. I say, Mrs. Martlet."

"Well, honey," and Mrs. Martlet, who had found it necessary at last to take matters entirely under her own care, Linnet only standing by and looking on, began to turn over the bruised greengages as tenderly as a nurse handles a wounded patient. "What is it? You can take off a bit more scum if you like, only you mind to take it off carefully, whatever you do."

"Oh, dear, no, thank you. I don't want to have anything more to do with it. I will just stand here and look, and then it will seem easier another time."

"Very well. I don't doubt but what it comes strange at first, same as a many other things. But what was it you was a-going to say, Miss Linnet?"

"I have quite forgotten. Something about Mrs. Plummersleigh, I think."

"Mrs. Plummersleigh? Oh, yes, I remember—her as come back with you and Mrs. Polemont after the dance, as I said myself to Martlet you'd have been just as

happy among the live creatures on the farm, as tossed up with fine clothes and set among them you haven't been used to. Mr. Aubury was wonderful particular about my having the best set of ivy-leaf damask out for the table, though, if I'd been let to do according to my own likings, I should have said the acorn pattern was good enough for 'em both, Mrs. Polemont not being a woman as knows a deal about a house; and that brings it round to me, Miss Linnet, what I was going to ask you about, if there was company likely to be invited, for, if there is, I'm the one that ought to be told."

"Company, Mrs. Martlet? No, I never heard of any company, except that my brother told Mrs. Polemont he hoped they would come over to dine again before long. I don't call that company."

"No, not enough to have the great linen-chest disturbed, and the business it is to sort them all into sets when once

you've begun to meddle. It was Martlet told me he thought he had heard the master saying to you there would have to be linen put out. I'm not a person that's curious, Miss Linnet, only I like to know beforehand."

"I should think you would, Mrs. Martlet. But perhaps it is the Mr. Moriston that is coming to stay with Miss Alvisa. Oh! dear, and I had forgotten all about it. What a good thing you did say something! Yes, my brother told me to tell you he should like a little room made ready. Not the big one, you know."

"I should think not, Miss Linnet, if it's for a single young man like Mr. Moriston to be put into it."

"I don't know who he is, Mrs. Martlet, but I should have thought Tidy could have put towels and things into the big room easily enough, and you need not have troubled yourself at all."

"Towels and things, Miss Linnet!" said

the old lady, depositing her greengages one by one in the now crystal-clear syrup. "As if that was the way to talk when there's the best bed to strip and the toily stand, and them two tall mirrors, and all the oak to be waxed, and the rugs to lay down, as it's a morning's work for Tidy if it's a minute, and me to put the finishing off after all, for Tidy isn't the girl I would trust with them vases of old china on the mantelshelf, and the very mirror frames is a piece of work to dust, as I've seen Miss Goodenough at 'em by the hour together. And you talk of towels and things. Law, Miss Linnet, how little you do know about a house!"

"And law, Mrs. Martlet," said the girl, mischievously, "why should I know anything at all when you know so much? And then I am not so bad. Don't you say yourself you never see linen mended like ours, and yet whose hands ever touch it but mine? There now. And didn't you

say, too, that those little lemon biscuits last week were as light as fingers could make them? And I wonder whose fingers had anything to do with them if mine hadn't. And then to tell me I know nothing about a house!"

Mrs. Martlet laughed good-naturedly, as one does at a child who, with all the importance of its two or three years' strength, stands by its mother's side, and puts out its little hands to help to push the big table she is moving, and, when it is moved, looks up into her face with such innocent satisfaction, as much as to say, "We have done it, haven't we?"

"Well, Miss Linnet, if it pleases you I wouldn't go again' it. But when there's one to cream the butter, and whisk the egg, and stir in the flour, there isn't a deal left but to drop 'em clean and round on the tins, and I won't say but what you did frame to that better nor what you've done with the greengages this morning. And

there's reason in everything if I did praise 'em. Have your own way, Miss Linnet. And that's all the company, is it? Nothing but a gentleman."

"Nothing but a gentleman, Mrs. Martlet. And perhaps not even him."

"Then he's welcome. Or else—but, Miss Linnet, there's nothing more you can do now. I don't doubt you'd rather be at the swan-pools."

"Yes, I would, Mrs. Martlet."

And Linnet went.

Or else. And Mrs. Martlet thought her own thoughts as she skimmed her preserves, and then drew the pan aside to cool. If it was only a gentleman it was all right. She was rather jealous of ladies coming to the castle, for there was never any telling what might happen, though, thank goodness, as she said to herself, the master was not like most, ready to make a fool of himself for the first pretty face that came in his way. Still a plain face fooled

a man sometimes, if the woman that owned it knew how to manage for herself. And she must say she had had her doubts about that quiet, low-spoken Mrs. Plummersleigh, for whom the ivy-leaf damask had been brought out, and for whose sake, no one else's, she was sure,—the master being a man who was never dainty about his food—she had been told to prepare those dessert biscuits, and to see that the dinner was as delicate as good cooking could make it.

But Mrs. Martlet was not a woman to talk.

CHAPTER XVI.

LINNET did not go back to the swan-pools after her somewhat ineffectual attempt to preserve greengages whole in halves. Instead she went to Miss Alvisa, who, the morning being bright and sunny, had had her sofa taken out into the garden, and was lying under the beech-tree with her books and work about her.

"Keith's parlour, I call this," she said, as Linnet settled herself down in a swing, conveniently situated for rocking to and fro within reach of Miss Alvisa's hand, "because I hope he will spend many pleasant mornings here. And you must come too, Linnet. Our King Arthur

readings will be ever so much better now that we have him to help us."

Linnet gave a little shrug. She would as soon learn preserving any day as meet a strange gentleman.

"When do you say he is coming, Miss Alvisa?"

"Saturday, I think."

"And this is Thursday. And for how long?"

"Well, I hoped he would have stayed with me for two or three months, so as to get quite strong again."

"Oh, dear, poor man! Is he an invalid?"

"Yes, rather. At any rate, he has been working a great deal too hard, this being his last term, and the doctors said he must give up and take a good long rest; but the tiresome boy tells me that he has made up his mind to go as travelling tutor by-and-by to Lord Stormont's two little boys. They are going to spend some time

moving about in England and on the Continent, and he thinks it will be as good for his health as being idle here."

"*Quite*, I should think," said Linnet, who was very ready for any arrangement which should keep Keith Moriston away from the old vicarage.

"And he says that Lord Stormont may send for him at any time. They do not exactly know yet when they will start. Lord Stormont is the owner of Airdrie Muir, you know, where Keith was brought up, and they have always been very kind to him, so that it would not be wise to let such an opportunity pass."

"I should think not at all. Then perhaps he may only just come for a very little while."

"Well, a month, I hope. I shall be very much disappointed if it is less than a month, when I had expected three."

"Our readings won't be half so pleasant, Miss Alvisa, when he comes."

"I think they will be a great deal pleasanter, Linnet. He knows a great deal more about books than we do, and can see deeper down into the meaning of things."

"I don't care how deep he sees; I am sure it won't be half so pleasant. I think I shall come to-morrow and bid you good-bye until after he is gone."

"Very well, Miss Wilful, just as you please. You will find the gate in its usual place whenever you have a mind to open it. And besides, you know, he will not always be here. Your brother has very kindly asked him to go and fish the swan-pools whenever he likes."

"Down by the dingle? Oh! Miss Alvisa, that is worse than ever. I have always been able to go there and do just as I liked."

"Well, Keith will not prevent you from doing just as you like; he is very inoffen-

sive, and will take no notice of you if you take no notice of him."

"That is just what Mrs. Martlet used to say to me, when I was a little girl and did not like to go near the tame magpie—'He will take no notice of you if you take no notice of him.' But he used to come after me all the same, and peck at my ankles, too, before I had long frocks."

"All right. But Keith is not a magpie. Perhaps it would be better for him if he had a little more of the magpie's gift of talking; and certainly it would be better for him if he had a magpie's readiness in coming after people, instead of getting as far away from them as he can. So that I do not think you need be afraid. And besides you have long frocks now. And, lastly, I can tell your brother that he need not say anything to him about the fishing."

"Oh! no, please don't do that, brother Owen would think I had been so rude to

say anything about it; only, you see, you *might* just tell Mr. Moriston not to come when he sees me there. Will you?"

"All right," said Miss Alvisa, laughing. Perhaps she had a notion that some day, before Keith went off to his tutorship, Linnet might think differently on that matter. "But I do not fancy he will want telling. He is very shy. It takes a good deal to persuade him that he is welcome anywhere."

"I am glad of that," said Linnet, with unnecessary straightforwardness. "It is so tiresome to find people there when you think you are going to be all by yourself. It was only yesterday I went down, and there was a nasty, shabby-looking fellow idling about, and I had to come away again. Brother Owen said, if I saw anyone there again, I was not to speak, but look very hard at them, and turn round and come straight back to him. And I mean to do so next time."

"Very proper," replied Miss Alvisa, smiling at the appearance Linnet would present under the circumstances. "But I really don't think you will find poor Keith a nuisance. You must tell me, if you do, and I will be sure to speak to him about it. Are you going to stay, and have a reading this morning?"

"No; that tiresome Mrs. Martlet kept me so long over the preserves, and then she said what I did was to spoil them after all. I think I will go home now, and the day after to-morrow I will come."

"Very well. To say good-bye to me, I suppose?"

"Yes, for the present—until Mr. Moriston has gone away. Oh! it is such a pity; for we are just coming to the beautiful part where Sir Galahad achieves the quest of the Sangreal. And to have to stop—well, if it were not that you want him to come, Miss Alvisa, I do so wish those

Stormont people would set off upon their travels immediately."

"Very well, Linnet, we shall see. Good morning."

And Linnet jumped down from the swing, and, kissing Miss Alvisa, was soon amongst the dingle trees, singing as merrily as any of the birds that fluttered in their branches.

On the appointed morning, she took old Mallory's book, and set off to the swan-pools, intending to have a quiet hour there with the "Knights of the Round Table" before going across to Miss Alvisa's. But, to her disgust, some one was there before her, sitting on a bit of overhanging bank at the opposite side of the pool.

Was it the lad who had interrupted her a day or two before? Linnet thought so at first, but, after inspecting him as closely as she could through the low bushes, she decided that he belonged to a better sort;

though that made things all the worse for him, as he ought to have had more good sense than to go and make himself at home in a gentleman's private grounds. And that he did feel quite at home was evident from the manner in which he was lolling there, with one book in his hands, and two or three more lying about on the bank beside him. He was so much absorbed in his reading that he did not look across, though she purposely made as much rustling as she could to draw his attention to her side of the pool.

But Miss Linnet knew her lesson this time. Summoning up all the dignity of which she was capable, she struck vigorously through the hazel brake, first wrapping round her a scarlet shawl, which she generally used as a cushion, so that she might present a more conspicuous appearance. Then, marching down to the edge of the pool, she planted herself exactly opposite the intruder, and, giving a some-

what unnecessarily emphatic cough, waited for him to become aware of her presence.

Which he did by-and-by. Lifting his eyes from the book, they met hers, levelling a steady look of disgust at him from under the shadow of very scornful brows. When she saw that she had attracted his notice, she kept her eyes fixed on him for a moment or two, holding herself very upright all the time; and then, turning her back upon him, she walked rapidly up the bank again towards the hazel brake.

When she reached it, she turned to see what effect her course of treatment had produced. The stranger was no longer there. He must have taken himself off very quickly, for he was already through the little gate and over the stile on the opposite side of the footpath, and shouldering away up the moors with his books, a regular bundle of them, under his arm, in search, probably, of a more undisturbed retreat.

She had done for him, at any rate. With a comical little feeling of importance, she folded the scarlet shawl and settled down for an hour of reading before going across to Miss Alvisa.

But somehow she could not enjoy old Mallory's quaint story as usual. She felt she had been rather too hard upon this poor man, whoever he might be. She had not quite meant to send him scudding over the moor in such a hurry. If he had fidgeted uneasily, and made some sort of apology, which could have been heard well enough across that narrow end of the pool, it would have satisfied her. Or if even he had braved her look, and stuck boldly to his bit of bank and his books, she would have felt, if very indignant, more comfortable than at present. Because one can more easily bear the sense of wrong received than of wrong inflicted. She knew how she would have felt herself if anyone had behaved so to her—how all

her pride would have boiled over, how she would have dashed away, and never willingly come again within a mile of the place where she had been so insulted. And somehow the poor fellow looked so humbled and disappointed as he struggled up the moor with his burden of books. That was the worst part of it. If he had looked very indignant, she would not have cared half so much, or if he had gone off with a jaunty, amused, half insolent air. But now the more she thought about what she had done, the more rebuked she felt.

At last, finding that her thoughts would not keep out of this uncomfortable track, she took her book back to the house, and had a scamper with Bobtail over the seventeen acre to fill up the time until she needed to start for her appointment with Miss Alvisa. That, at any rate, would help to blow away the tiresome feeling of self-reproach which would not let her enjoy her favourite book as usual.

Twelve o'clock found her at the old vicarage gate. Miss Alvisa was again under the beech-tree, her sofa so arranged that she was facing the gate. And almost alongside of her, only facing the other way, so that they could look at each other as they talked, stretched at full length on the lawn, with his hands behind his head, lay a young man, probably this Mr. Keith Moriston, who must have come a day before his time.

It was very provoking. However, she must make his acquaintance some time, and perhaps the sooner the better, especially as her brother had asked him to come over to the castle. Besides, Miss Alvisa had seen her, and therefore she must go forward. But Miss Alvisa settled the matter by saying, with an amused smile, "Come in, Linnet."

Linnet came, slowly, as a child to say a lesson which is by no means perfectly learned.

"Linnet, this is Mr. Moriston; he found he was able to get away sooner than he expected, and so he came last night. Miss Aubury, Mr. Moriston."

By this time Keith Moriston was on his feet, and facing Linnet, ready to do his part in the ceremony of introduction. The girl, glancing nervously up into his face,—for she dreaded strangers of any kind, and especially what she called men strangers,—recognized the shy yet masterful brown eyes of the intruder whom, less than a couple of hours ago, she had driven away so unceremoniously from his resting-place on the bank of the swan-pools.

Keith was just going to make a bow, when, somewhat to his embarrassment, he found there was no one to bow to. For Linnet, much more quickly than she came in, had fled away to the gate, bounding over rugs and flower-beds, and anything else that lay in the road, and was now with trembling fingers trying to open it.

Probably in another moment, if unsuccessful, she would have bounded over that too, but Miss Alvisa said,

"Fetch her back, Keith."

Very obediently, somewhat after the fashion of a Scotch collie, who finds it his duty to hunt up a runaway sheep, and so does it without much personal interest in the pursuit, Keith Moriston, in even less time than it had taken Linnet to clear them, was over the flower-beds and at her elbow.

"Miss Alvisa says you are to come back."

And without more ado he fastened upon a bit of her sleeve, and led her by it to the sofa. There leaving her, he disappeared, for which poor Linnet felt heartily grateful.

"Oh! Miss Alvisa," she said, "what am I to do?"

"Do!" said Miss Alvisa, laughing heartily, "why, you can do nothing at all."

"But I did behave so badly to him this morning, and he is the very same."

"Yes, he is the very same; there is no doubt about that. He told me all about it not ten minutes ago. He says he never felt more uncomfortable in his life than when he gathered his books together and went off up the moorside."

"I wish you would tell him how uncomfortable I felt too after I had done it, if that would make it any better."

"You will be able to tell him that yourself sometime maybe, so I think I had better say nothing about it. You know he would not have been there at all, only Mr. Aubury came over this morning to have a talk with me about some business matters, and finding him here, and thinking perhaps he might not know what to do with himself whilst we were busy with accounts, he proposed that he should go over to the swan-pools. That was how you happened

to meet him, or else he really was intending to call first."

"Perhaps he thinks it was somebody else. That *would* be a comfort."

"No; he knows it was Miss Aubury herself. Don't trouble yourself about it, but next time you see him, just go up to him as if nothing had happened, and tell him how very sorry you are."

"Do you think that will set everything straight?"

"More than straight, Linnet. Keith is very simple-minded, and I am sure he will never make you feel awkward about it. And tell your brother, too, as soon as you can."

"Yes. I will go right off and do it now."

Which Linnet did. Kissing Miss Alvisa, who seemed to have a fairy gift of setting things right for other people, however crooked they might be for herself, she

went straight home, and did not even stay to take her hat off before she told brother Owen the whole story: how she had "dispersed" the intruder, sending him disconsolate, with his books, up the moorland-path; and how, going to see Miss Alvisa a couple of hours later, she had encountered him again, and, instead of allowing him to be properly introduced to her, had rushed off to the garden-gate, whence he had fetched her back, and then disappeared; that being the present state of affairs between them.

Under the circumstances, Mr. Aubury felt the least he could do was to ask the trespasser over to dinner, and that at the earliest opportunity too. And so it came to pass that on the very evening of the day whose morning had witnessed such a manifestation of dignity down at the swan-pools, Linnet had to receive Keith Moriston in her brother's drawing-room, and make her apology with such grace as was

possible. She made it with most un-Linnet-like meekness. There was nothing this time of cold defiance in the glance which was lifted to him from beneath those pretty dark brows. And her voice quaked, and so did the fingers which he held in his great palm, as she said, with almost comical ruefulness,

"If you please, Mr. Moriston, I am so sorry. I will never do it again."

"Pray don't say anything," replied Keith, holding the little fingers fast, and feeling that, if ever he were sent after this runaway sheep again, he would have much more personal interest in the bringing back of her. "I don't want to hear anything more about it."

"Oh! but Miss Alvisa told me I *was* to say something, and I always have to do what Miss Alvisa tells me. I felt ever so uncomfortable after I had behaved so rudely and come down to the bank and stared at you. Only brother Owen had told me

to do exactly like that, had you not, brother?"

"Yes, *exactly* like that," said Mr. Aubury, laughing. "So Linnet was only acting under orders. You must show your forgiveness of us both by coming to-morrow morning, and then Linnet shall show you the best places for fishing. She knows every cranny and corner of the pools far better than I do myself; and I am sure she will be very glad to help you."

Linnet did not reply to that, for just then Mrs. Martlet came in to say that dinner was ready. But next morning Keith Moriston was down at the swan-pools, ready for his lesson.

CHAPTER XVII.

DID ever a bright-eyed, innocent-hearted girl teach a young student where the darting pike lay thickest under the reedy banks, and teach him nothing more? And when Keith Moriston had looked, not once but many times, into those clear dark eyes, and so looked that they had learned to fall beneath his glance; and when he knew that morning by morning Linnet was to be found wandering amongst the blossoming grasses of the dingle; and when Mr. Aubury, good, unsuspicious man, anxious to show all kindness to Miss Alvisa's guest, had bidden him come there as often as he liked, was it to be wondered

at if the sunny August noonday often found him stretched under the willows by the swan-pool, studying no book but Linnet's face? And that Miss Alvisa, etching under the shadow of her own beech-tree boughs, often had only her own thoughts for company?

Linnet, too, found the dingle a fair place. It was better to wander there now, listening for Keith Moriston's tread upon the last year's leaves, than to race over the seventeen-acre and the plantations with Snip and Bobtail and all the rest of them at her heels. A change which the four-footed people did not understand at all, nor appreciate.

And Linnet grew quieter. So much quieter that not only Mr. Aubury and Miss Alvisa, but the old housekeeper noticed it.

"It's because she's overmuch moped," said the good woman to her husband one day, when Keith Moriston had been about a fortnight at the old vicarage. She was

ironing in the front kitchen, Tidy being busy at the back, washing up after the butter-making, and Martlet sat in the doorway with his pipe, the blue smoke gently curling up between him and the scarcely more solid-looking towers of Broadminster, which rose beyond the Abbot's Florey valley, three miles away. "She's overmuch moped, that's what it is. She'd ought to have more young people about the place, young girls to match herself."

"Nay, not she," said Martlet, shrewdly. "She don't want no young girls about her. She's got Miss Alvisa, and Miss Alvisa's as good as a hundred of 'em."

"That may she be and welcome, Martlet, and yet not what Miss Linnet stands in need of. She wants somebody she can talk her own bits of thoughts to, same as she can't to one who has seen Miss Alvisa's share of trouble. Whether you're young, or whether you're old, or whether you're

middle-aged, Martlet, it's a hard thing and a bad not to have no one to say your own thoughts to when you've a mind for it."

"It isn't what you know a deal of, I lay, Betsey," said her spouse.

"I know more of it than what you might think, Martlet. It isn't everything that I can open out to you about, though I will say you've been a good husband to me, as men go. There's times and times, Martlet, when I've felt that moped and queer you might frighten me with a broom-handle set up in a corner, and yet I've never made no sign of it, but just gone about my work same as usual, and when I've had a chance to go and see my sister Wright, and have a good outing with her, it's made me as different as different could be."

Martlet puffed his pipe in silence. He was as wise as most men, but the mopes he could not understand, nor how people

got them, nor what was best to take for them.

"Now," said his wife, "if Mr. Aubury was to speak a word to me about it, this is just what I should advise him: to get three or four young people into the house, and have things bright and cheerful, and blind-man's buff, and games, same as old Miss Goodenough had used to have 'em at Christmas time. Law, Martlet, the beds and beds I've had to make up when I lived under-girl with her, and the holidays was on, and never considered it a trouble neither, no, nor wouldn't at the present time, though nobody but myself knows what it is to get the best lodging-room fettled for company, what with the oak to rub, and the furniture to strip, and all that. But I'd do it, yes, and welcome, to see Miss Linnet same as she'd used to be last fore end."

"Yes, Betsey. And if the master got a fry of strange folk into the house, as like

as not he'd be fishing one on 'em out for himself before long. There's many a wedding gets made up that way."

Mrs. Martlet paused in setting the folds of a starched front, put her iron back on the stand, folded her arms, and faced about upon her husband.

"You say that, Martlet, and to me, who have seen him coming and going in the house this ten years past. He's not that kind of man, isn't the master, to go and make a fool of himself, so don't you believe it, no, nor try to make me, neither."

"I don't know as it shows a man's a fool, Betsey, to think he'd be the better of a good wife."

"Yes, it does, Martlet, when he's got a young lady like our Miss Linnet to look after him, with such pretty ways as he'd never get anybody else to match them."

"And maybe he won't have Miss Linnet so long as you think," said Martlet, who had seen those two sauntering down by

the swan-pools, and had his own thoughts about it, though he never opened out to Betsey on the subject.

"What makes you say that, Martlet?"

"I don't say as anything makes me say it. It only stands to reason. A young lady can't go all her life rampaging over the pastures, and fetching out rabbits, and scrambling after squirrels. If Miss Linnet don't set her mind to marrying some of these days, it'll be because she's like no other I ever heard tell of; and when she's been fetched, and fetched she will be as sure as sure, you'll see the master won't stay here alone."

"Martlet, you don't say it. Have you a reason why?"

"I don't know, Betsey, as I've any reason to speak of. I just looks round about, and I takes notice, that's all."

"Martlet," said his wife, grasping her iron firmly, and coming a step nearer to him, with solemnity stamped upon her

face, "Martlet, *is* it that lady as come here to dine with Mrs. Polemont? As you're a Christian man, tell me."

"I don't know as it's a lady at all, Betsey, and I don't say it's neither here nor there, for all he was walking her up and down the garden a good half hour, if it was a minute, when they took Miss Linnet over to Broadminster afore the dance. And then when him and her set them home after they'd stopped to dinner that night, it was Mrs. Plummersleigh and him walked behind, ay, and a good bit behind, same as you and me had used to, Betsey, when we was keeping company at the first. If there was four to walk, Betsey, it was never you and me who took the front."

"No, Martlet, it wasn't," replied his wife, a touch of tenderness softening the expression of severity with which his bold hypothesis had clouded her face; "it was behind we went, if we went at all. And

now you've mentioned it, Martlet, she *have* been about the place a goodish deal, and a sort of person, too, that knows where she's going and what she means to do. There's some that looks about 'em and doesn't see, but that isn't the lady as is staying with Mrs. Polemont."

"Don't you go over-fast, Betsey. I don't say it's the lady that's staying with Mrs. Polemont, and I don't say it's anybody else; all I say is, there were them two walking behind same as me and you used to, and whether it means anything, or whether it means nothing, isn't for you and me to judge."

"It mayn't be for you to judge, Martlet, but it is for *me*. I haven't lived here for the last ten years, with everything, as you may say, given into my hands, to have Mrs. Plummersleigh or anybody else put over me. And if the master was let to do as he likes, there never would be anybody put over me. If it's a wife he's thinking

about, it's somebody as has pushed him forward to it."

"Nay, Betsey, it's easy going that road; I didn't need nobody to push *me* afore I made a start."

"No, Martlet, you went fast enough, as I'm a witness to. But the master's a different sort. I've as many eyes behind my spectacles as serve me to see that."

"Well, be easy, Betsey, about it, like I am."

"No, Martlet, I'm not the woman to be easy after the words you've spoke. There's them in this parish that don't mean to let the master do as he likes. I don't take in the fancy dishes when there's company without hearing a deal; not that it makes any difference to me, nor goes farther than myself, let alone when it touches my own place, and then I don't think I'm wrong to open out to yourself."

"I'm safe, Betsey."

"Yes. And you remember the vicar was here a week or two back, when Miss Linnet was having her dinner at Miss Alvisa's, and he was at him in his nice, free, pleasant way about having a lady 'to give a finish to the place.' Them was his very words, Martlet, to give a finish to the place. He said that was all it wanted, just a lady to finish it off like. And if it's Mrs. Plummersleigh that it's going to be, well, then!"

And Mrs. Martlet planted down her iron with an emphatic thump on the folds of Mr. Aubury's linen front.

"Betsey, I wouldn't talk if I was you."

"It's what I'm not intending to do, Martlet, only to yourself, which it's a duty, and a privilege likewise. If it's another, I don't know but what I shall give warning. But if it's Mrs. Plummersleigh, Martlet——"

And again she faced round upon him with the flat iron.

"If it's Mrs. Plummersleigh, I shall stay."

"Maybe there's them that won't let you do as you like, Betsey."

"There's none will put me out of this here place so long as you are what you are to the master. We shall go and live at the keep, Martlet. I've heard the master say he would like a steady couple there. And then one could keep an eye."

"For why, honey?"

"Because look here, Martlet. It's for Miss Linnet's sake. It isn't as if she belonged to the master himself, his own flesh and blood, as you may say, and had a right to look for his to be hers. But she's only here because her brother, bless him, is one of the kindest and best of men; and if he was worked round to it—which no one can tell he won't be—she might be put out into the world and never so much as a sixpence to bless herself with, let alone what she gets from her

poor pa being in them foreign parts, so as there's a pension for her, but not to call more than beggary, and her brought up as she has been."

"Goodness, Betsey, how you do talk! As if there was anybody mean enough to do it!"

"And isn't there anybody mean enough? Well, then, Martlet, wait and you'll see. My sister Wright hasn't lived up in that yard where Mrs. Plummersleigh gives out tracts not to know what she is and what she'd as soon do as not do. Yes, and tells me, too, so as I've a right to speak. One as thinks you can never live lean enough, and grudges every bit of fat you put into a short-cake, and always at you if she smells a bit of bacon in the place, while my sister Wright says she gets that aggravated, if it was her last halfpenny she'd spend it over a rasher, so as Mrs. Plummersleigh might hear it frizzling in the pan, just to set her off, as you may say.

And is that the person for you and me and Miss Linnet to live comfortable under? I'll defy you to look me in the face, Martlet, and say it is."

"I don't say nothing," replied Martlet, rising slowly and shaking the ashes out of his pipe. "I just looks round about me, and I takes notice."

"Yes, and plenty there'll be to take notice on by-and-by. Mrs. Plummersleigh would part Miss Linnet and her brother just as soon as she wouldn't, if she thought it would serve her turns. And that's why I mean to stay about the place—not that I couldn't get a better any day, if it came to that—when there's a mistress put over me."

"Well, Betsey, you've cooked a rare roast, according to your own thinking, but there's the leg of mutton a-wanting to start with."

"It won't be wanting long, Martlet, if I'm the woman I take myself to be for

seeing what lies round about. And so now you know, you do."

And with that Mrs. Martlet fetched a basin of water to sprinkle Mr. Aubury's shirt-front, for it had got too dry for the iron whilst she had been casting his matrimonial horoscope.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IT was about the middle of July when the vicar's wife saw the castle party walking home after that quiet little dinner, and by the middle of August everyone in Abbot's Florey said that Mr. Aubury was going to marry Mrs. Plummersleigh.

Not that there was really any particular reason for saying so, and certainly not that Mrs. Plummersleigh herself gave any cause for the gossip. Indeed, Mrs. Polemont, who was delighted when any of these little flying rumours reached her, because, as she said, wherever there is smoke there must be fire somewhere, or

something which, with judicious management, may be kindled into fire,—Mrs. Polemont would have been better pleased if her visitor's behaviour had been more marked in its consciousness of Mr. Aubury's now evident attention.

For whether Maria had any sort of feeling for him or not, or whether she knew what people were talking about or not, or whether she noticed anything special in his behaviour or not, Mrs. Polemont, who found out nearly everything about her neighbours, never could find out. And Maria was not a person you could "tax" with anything, neither was she a person you could drop hints to; she might understand, but if she did, there was never a spark of consciousness to let you know anything about it. True, she never put on that brown hat now, which she used to wear with the black silk dress; she had had the navy cashmere made up, too, and very well she looked in it; but

whether that meant anything, Mrs. Polemont could not tell any more than she could tell what sort of feeling Maria was cherishing for the master of Florey Castle.

Then she was just as devoted as ever to the work she had undertaken in the parish, seemed to enjoy nothing so much as going about in her district and reprimanding the women for using too much fat bacon, never seemed particularly anxious to take a walk with Linnet, though it did happen pretty frequently that the walk was taken. And if they ever came out of church at the same time that Mr. Aubury did, who went regularly now every Sunday evening of his life, it was Mrs. Polemont herself who contrived it, not Maria. Yet people kept on talking.

"Now, Mrs. Polemont, tell me, *is* there anything in it?" Mrs. Flowerdale said, with almost what might be called an air of authority, for if anyone had a right to know what was going on in the parish, the

vicar's wife had. What Mrs. Polemont found out by that merry, good-humoured roundabout questioning of hers, Mrs. Flowerdale found out by going and boldly demanding information on the subject; it was due to her position, and she had no hesitation in asking it, just as a parochially authorised inspector of nuisances makes the tour of your premises, with a fine independence which, in any other person, would amount to ill breeding, not to say insolence. And so, sitting there in the doctor's pretty drawing-room, with the doctor's pretty wife pouring out afternoon tea for her, she at once proceeded to business.

"I ask you seriously, Mrs. Polemont, *is* there anything?"

"Indeed, Mrs. Flowerdale, I cannot tell you. I really know nothing whatever about it. I must say that Mr. Aubury comes to our house more frequently than he used to, but, if he has any purpose in

it, he has never told me so; of course, if he has, George and I would be very glad."

"Of course; it would be an excellent thing for them both, and the age so suitable, too."

Mrs. Polemont admitted the facts.

"And then," continued the vicar's wife, "that poor child Linnet would have some one to look after her, which she needs, if report says truly. What Mr. Aubury can be thinking of, to allow that young Moriston to go to the castle farm as he does, I cannot imagine."

"Oh, Mrs. Flowerdale! Do you think there is anything in that direction?"

And little Mrs. Polemont, who enjoyed nothing so much as hearing about a possible engagement, began to quiver with suppressed eagerness, as a cavalry horse when it listens to the flourish of trumpets.

"I cannot really say, Mrs. Polemont. All I know is this, that he is constantly there, and as often as not Linnet is with

him. My husband happened to be crossing that bit of pasture land down by the swan-pools the other day, because Mr. Aubury had told him he might make use of the private road whenever he wanted a short cut home; and there they both were, sitting side by side as comfortably as possible, with not a creature to look after them. Now, Mrs. Polemont, that is what I call morally wrong. A young man of no prospects whatever, and no means of livelihood. I shall ask Percy to speak to Mr. Aubury about it."

Mrs. Polemont did not see how young Moriston's prospects could affect the moral aspect of the proceeding, but Mrs. Flowerdale was not a woman one liked to contradict. She generally made up her mind about a thing so decidedly before she mentioned it at all, that to argue with her was to provoke a quarrel. And to be on bad terms with one's vicar's wife was such a nuisance. Still she was not sorry to hear

about Linnet and Mr. Moriston, because, if there was going to be anything in that direction, it would make the position so much pleasanter for Maria, if there was going to be anything in *that* direction too. And though Mrs. Polemont attended to the proprieties so far as they had any right to be attended to, she was always ready to leave a margin for other people, whose notions on the subject might not be just the same as her own. And she had faith in Linnet, that the girl would do nothing that was not noble and true.

The doctor's wife had very few of what are called "resources" within herself, and so she was obliged to fill up her life out of other people's affairs, that vast reservoir which so seldom runs dry, only bursts sometimes, and causes so much mischief. But she always turned on the tap of information and the tap of inquiry with the utmost good-will. In those affairs concerning which she took the greatest inter-

est, namely, matrimonial affairs, she would far rather help on an engagement than mar it by any spiteful little innuendoes, whether the people belonged to herself or anyone else. She believed—and she knew as much about Keith Moriston as Mrs. Flowerdale did—that he was a true-hearted, chivalrous fellow, perhaps somewhat lazy, as physically overgrown young men are apt to be—at least, so the doctor had told her—but with not a fibre of vice or disloyalty about him. At the same time, whether he was what might be called a "good match" was quite another question, and one which Mr. Aubury must decide for himself.

But Mr. Moriston and Linnet were not uppermost in Mrs. Flowerdale's thoughts this afternoon.

"Then you don't deny it, Mrs. Polemont?" she said, after a pause, during which, whilst she trifled with her spoon, she had been considering whether, viewed

parochially, it would not be a very good thing for Mr. Aubury to marry Mrs. Plummersleigh; for that lady was so fond of her church, and gave almost all her substance—that is, of time and trouble—in the advancement of its external interests, so far as the most diligent domiciliary visitation could advance them. And if she brought her influence to bear upon Mr. Aubury, who had substance of a more substantial nature, why then there was scarcely any limit to what might be asked from him in the shape of charitable subscriptions. The vicar might almost give up sending round lists at all, which would be such a relief.

"You don't deny it, Mrs. Polemont?"

"Deny what, dear Mrs. Flowerdale?"

"Why, that there is something between Mrs. Plummersleigh and Mr. Aubury."

Mrs. Polemont was delighted that the vicar's wife should recur to that subject. It showed how much importance she was

attaching to it. *Had* Mr. Aubury been confiding his intentions to Mr. Flowerdale, and had the vicar just allowed himself to whisper a word to his wife?

"I really can't deny anything, Mrs. Flowerdale, simply because I don't know anything to deny. Maria is not a woman who ever says much about herself."

"No. Then I believe there *is* something in it."

"There may be. I cannot tell."

"Because, you know, Percy and I were coming home from the Miss Laudervilles' one night, not long ago, and we came in sight of you all, Mr. Aubury, and Linnet, and you, and Mrs. Plummersleigh. And Mr. Aubury was walking some distance behind, with Mrs. Plummersleigh, and they were arm in arm. I wanted Percy to hurry on a little, and ask him a subscription for the rural hospital; you know it saves so much trouble if one can get a thing settled without the ceremony of a

call; but Percy said no, he would not disturb them on any account. Of course I knew what he meant immediately."

Mrs. Polemont smiled with an air of subdued intelligence. She did not know they had been walking arm in arm. It certainly did look rather marked, particularly as the road was neither rough nor dangerous between the castle and the doctor's house.

"I was perfectly sure, from the manner in which he spoke, that there was more behind than he chose to tell me. You know you can gather a great deal from a man's manner of speaking about such things. They don't take things for granted as women do, in a general way, and so when they *do* make a circumstance of anything, you may be more sure there is something in it."

"There may be," said Mrs. Polemont, jubilantly hopeful that the vicar's wife was right. "All I can say is, that Maria has

never mentioned anything of the kind to *me*."

"That goes for nothing. It does not at all imply that he has never mentioned anything of the kind to *her*. When a shy, quiet man like Mr. Aubury offers his arm to a lady under such circumstances, he generally offers his hand too."

Mrs. Polemont laughed. Mrs. Flowerdale did not often put things so neatly as that. If it really should be true, how delightful!

"I almost think," she said, "I might speak to Maria about it."

"Almost think? Why, I should have done it long ago, if I had been you. If you don't mind you will find they are engaged, and the wedding-day fixed, before a word is said to you about it. But you will remember that I have given you warning. And now I must go. I have really made quite a visitation."

"Not at all longer than has been agree-

able, I assure you," said Mrs. Polemont, cordially. "And I do hope you will come in again soon. You see Mrs. Plummersleigh spends so much of her time going about in the parish, I might really almost as well not have her staying with me at all. I tell her sometimes that the vicar has taken complete possession of her."

"Well, you see, Percy is so glad to get hold of anyone who really will take an interest in church matters."

"Oh! yes; I don't grudge it in the least. I am so glad for Maria to be appreciated. Only it is no more than fair, you know, that you should make it up to me."

"Of course. And then perhaps it is just as well that you should be let down gently. Because, if you are likely to have to part with Mrs. Plummersleigh altogether, you ought to be getting accustomed to it by degrees. You will tell me now, will you not, when it is really

settled? I never chatter about things."

"You shall be the very first, Mrs. Flowerdale, as soon as I know anything myself. Now do come again soon."

Mrs. Flowerdale repeated the substance of the conversation to the vicar that night, as they sat together over their dessert, but not a word could she get out of him as to whether Mr. Aubury had been saying anything on the subject.

CHAPTER XIX.

THROUGHOUT all that summer-time Mr. Aubury might have been seen going as usual to the old house by the church. Miss Alvisa was not quite so dependent upon him for companionship, now that Keith Moriston was with her, but still there were matters of business to arrange and accounts to settle, which gave him need enough to watch from time to time for the drawing aside of the curtain, still, as before, the signal that there was a welcome for him within, if the welcome was different.

That had been indeed good-bye which they said to each other whilst Mrs. Pole-

mont was helping Linnet to choose her dancing-dress at Broadminster. Good-bye to the daily kiss and the mutual recognition of the love which for so many years had been kept green and fresh between them, whilst she lay there, shut out from all other but his, and he lived on alone with Linnet, better content, as he truly said, with the little Miss Alvisa could give him than with the much which many others might willingly have granted.

But not good-bye to the love itself. There it lay, far down in the hearts of both of them, a thing that could not die nor change for such as they. It lived on for Alvisa Clerehart, a little holy of holies in which she worshipped, as she now thought, alone. It lived on for Owen Aubury in a regret, a proud regret, which shut out for him all other longing, all other hope.

"For I shall never do as she tells me," he said to himself over and over again, as

the words from which she had so absolutely crushed out one single tone of pain or reproach came back to him from time to time. In that way, if in no other way, could he be faithful to the one love of his life.

And now he had fully settled in his own mind how to provide for Linnet's introduction into the society which one and another had told him she ought to have. That was why he had so readily fallen in with Mrs. Polemont's pleasant little plans and contrivances for throwing him into the company of Mrs. Plummersleigh. That was why he had taken his place at her side when they were returning home after the dance, and availed himself of sundry opportunities of quiet conversation, which the small public of Abbot's Florey, quite unknown to him, had interpreted into the actual existence of an understanding between them.

And the more he saw of Mrs. Plum-

mersleigh, the more he felt that she was the very one for the position of companion to Linnet. Her intimacy with the doctor and his wife was an assurance of her respectability. She was sensible, unassuming, with no wish to take advantage of any little attentions paid to her, and no vanity ready to construe into preference any marks of personal interest shown. For Owen Aubury, though a shy man, and sensitive, and full of self-depreciation, was yet shrewd enough to perceive, better than men of more conceit would have done, where attempts were being made to entangle him. His very lack of occupation with self set him at liberty to be occupied with others, and he felt that he judged Maria Plummersleigh rightly in concluding that she was innocent of any desire to obtain influence over him, even if he should place her in a position where she might naturally consider herself able to exercise it.

Then she was a woman of active, though quiet habits. She had already, as Mrs. Polemont's guest, shown herself anxious to redeem the time by laying out for herself plans of usefulness in the village. And yet what she did was never made the occasion of any flourish of trumpets. You never heard Mrs. Plummersleigh speak of her own good works in the tract district, nor did she ever lead the conversation up to any point for the sake of bringing forward her opinions or arrogating importance to herself. In fine, her manner of life during the few weeks that he had been somewhat closely observing her, was such as to warrant him in hoping that, if he made her an inmate of his house, she would bring into it all those good qualities which a man desires in the lady whom he would place for a longer or shorter period at the head of his establishment.

The only difficulty now was a suitable way of ascertaining whether Mrs. Plum-

mersleigh herself would be willing to accept the position which he desired to offer. There was always a certain amount of awkwardness in asking a lady to undertake services which were to be recognized by the payment of cheques, quarterly or otherwise. Mrs. Polemont's visitor was not without a kind of dignity which might upon occasion almost crush anyone who made mistaken advances. He might perhaps have misunderstood her position altogether in supposing that she would undertake such a situation. Of course it would not do to ask her to call upon him at the castle. Should he speak to Mrs. Polemont about it, or should he ask them all up to dinner, and get Keith Moriston to come over to smoke a cigar afterwards with the doctor, whilst he conducted Mrs. Plummersleigh over the grounds again and introduced the subject? There would be an awkwardness about that too, because what would become of Mrs. Polemont?

And Linnet, who knew nothing as yet about the matter, would be sure to break in upon them and make an embarrassing pause. Should he then write to Mrs. Polemont, and ask if she would kindly appoint a time for him to come over and see them quietly, as he had a subject of importance to talk over with Mrs. Plummersleigh?

He decided that the last would be the best plan, especially as, after sleeping upon it, he could still see none better. Accordingly he wrote to the doctor's wife, and that good little lady, in reply, begged that he would come up and dine with them on the following evening but one. Which he promised to do.

What could it mean, thought Mrs. Polemont, as she folded up the letter and put it carefully in her desk, but that Mr. Aubury wished to see Mrs. Plummersleigh with a view to making her an offer of marriage? There was no other "subject"

between them which could be invested with so much importance. They had no business transactions with each other, involving the necessity of personal interviews, and Maria was not a woman to make confidences to anyone, still less to expose herself to remark by making them to men of Mr. Aubury's position. Clearly then, he had made up his mind on the marriage question. Mrs. Flowerdale was right; there *was* an understanding between them. At least, there was going to be.

"Maria dear," she said, with a pleasant little air of mystery, as that lady came into the drawing-room, and quietly seated herself at the window, with a piece of embroidery which was intended for the border of a table-cloth, "we are going to have company to dinner the day after to-morrow."

"What, again!" said Mrs. Plummersleigh. "Really, Isabel, how gay you are! And the vicar and his wife here only last

night! And did I not hear you saying that you should have to ask the Sturts and Mrs. Gallen some day next week? But I believe the wives of medical men do have to entertain very frequently."

"I am not entertaining on George's account next Wednesday, though, Maria, and I don't think I am doing it on my own, because I haven't invited anyone. It is some one who has invited himself."

"Then I must say, Isabel, I think he has done a very unnecessary thing. One might almost call it taking a liberty.

And Mrs. Plummersleigh, sorting out some warm autumnal tints, went on with the embroidering of a blackberry spray.

"Wait until you know who it is," said Mrs. Polemont. "At any rate, I do not call it taking a liberty."

"Very well, then it is all right. I think people ought to be very intimate before they invite themselves to dine at other houses. I should consider it intrusive."

"Then you are considering Mr. Aubury intrusive. It is he who is coming on Wednesday."

The very slightest shade of embarrassment came into Mrs. Plummersleigh's manner. It was scarcely a blush which flitted over her face. It was more like a shadow of annoyance. She said not a word, only worked quietly on with her embroidery, that very silence convincing Mrs. Polemont that she knew very well what Mr. Aubury was coming about.

At last she said, and there was a little nervous hesitation in her voice,

"Shall you ask anyone else, Isabel?"

"No, Maria, certainly not. I could not think of doing it under the circumstances."

"I don't see it. When you have one to dine you may just as well have three or four. The providing is the same, and people help to entertain each other."

"It is not exactly a matter of *providing*," said Mrs. Polemont, with that sense of

importance which a woman naturally feels when she has been made the receptacle of a confidence which as yet belongs to herself alone, and confidence upon such an absorbing subject, too. "If it had only been a matter of providing a nice little dinner, there are plenty of people in the village that I could have thought of. I believe Mr. Aubury would prefer to come quite alone."

"And leave Linnet! I have a great mind to go over and keep her company, poor child!"

"Maria, I beg you will do nothing of the sort. I am quite sure Mr. Aubury would not—well, we should none of us like it."

"Very well. It is a matter of no especial consequence to me. Only I thought she might be lonely."

Was ever anyone so impracticable? thought Mrs. Polemont. Had she the least idea? Or was this outward careless-

ness merely a blind? But she would enter boldly upon the subject with her. The time had come at last for straightforwardness.

CHAPTER XX.

"MARIA, my dear."

"Yes."

"*Have* you any feeling about it, Maria? I don't ask from curiosity, but really it seems to have been brought about so differently from many things of this kind, and I should like to know before he comes. It will make it so much more easy for myself."

"Isabel, what *do* you mean?"

"I mean have you considered what you shall say to Mr. Aubury when he comes to the point? I don't think I ought to keep it from you, Maria, if you really *are* in the dark about it up to the present moment;

but it is chiefly, indeed I think I may say entirely, on your account that Mr. Aubury is coming on Wednesday. He has a matter of great importance to mention to you. He says he has had it on his mind for some time, but he has not been able to find a fitting opportunity for expressing it."

The embroidery did tremble a little now, but only a little.

"*Had* you any idea of it, Maria?"

"Isabel, I had *no* idea of it."

"But you feel as if you could give him a favourable answer. Do say now, Maria dear, that you feel as if you could give him a favourable answer. It would be such a satisfaction to both George and myself, if we thought you could."

"Isabel, it will be time enough to think about an answer when the question has been asked. Mr. Aubury has given me no reason to think he intends asking it at all."

"Maria! How *can* you? But they do say none are so blind as those who will not see. Do put that embroidery down and listen to reason."

"I can listen just as well when I am working, Isabel."

"Very well then. In all the time that we have lived at Abbot's Florey, we have dined at the castle once, and Mr. Aubury had called upon us twice, until within the last six weeks. You may count over the times he has been here since then, and, if you cannot draw a conclusion, why I give it up."

"Well, you see, Linnet is growing older, and wants companionship. Mr. Aubury says so himself."

"Yes; but she is not growing older any more quickly now than she has been for any time within the last twelvemonths, and, even if she had, there are plenty of young people about who would have been

very glad to make her acquaintance. No, Maria, it is companionship for himself that Mr. Aubury wants. George and I have felt sure of that ever since he began to come here so frequently, and we are not the only people who have noticed it."

"Who else has?"

"Well, Maria, I do not like to mention names. A doctor's wife can never be too careful in that respect, so much mischief is brought about by careless talking. But, if I have been asked once, I have been asked at least half a dozen times whether there really is anything between you and Mr. Aubury."

"It would be better then if people would attend to their own affairs," said Mrs. Plummersleigh, taking a fresh needleful of embroidery-silk, and outlining a blackberry leaf.

"So it would, Maria; a very great deal better. And that is why I wish you would

attend to yours a little more diligently. I am sure, if many women had the prospects that you have just now——"

"Isabel, it is all I wish to do, to attend to my own affairs, if other people would only leave them to me. If things be as you say, why need I disturb myself about them? I leave my future to Providence. You know where my trust is."

"Oh! Maria dear, if it comes to that, we all of us trust in Providence, after our own fashion. I don't suppose I am an atheist, any more than you are yourself."

Mrs. Plummersleigh shuddered.

"Isabel, I wish you would not use that word, even in jest. It produces a creeping sensation, which I can scarcely express."

"Yes, and it gives *me* a creeping sensation which I can scarcely express, Maria, when I see you so blindly indifferent to what might be such a happiness to you.

Do you wish then that Mr. Aubury had never asked me to arrange this interview for him?"

"I wish nothing at all, Isabel, but what is appointed for me. I have no doubt everything will turn out for the best. I never disturb myself about what I cannot influence in any way. At the same time, I must say you have always acted in a most kind and sisterly manner to me, and I am very sensible of it, though perhaps I do not express my gratitude so loudly as some people might."

"Oh, never mind your gratitude. I don't care a bit about that. At least, you know, Maria, I mean that I don't want you to feel obliged or anything of that sort. I am sure, if ever I can do anything to help you, I shall do it with the very greatest pleasure, only I do wish you could see this matter as I do. However, if it annoys you, I will not say any more about

it. I feel sure that you will do what is right, whatever happens; at any rate, what you think is right."

"Thank you, Isabel. You may be sure that I shall endeavour to act conscientiously."

"Conscientiously, of course. Why one expects conscientiousness from you, just as one expects consistency from a clergyman, though one does not always get that. If there is a word carved upon your heart, Maria, I believe it is conscientiousness."

Mrs. Plummersleigh's silence gave consent.

"And you wouldn't wish me now, would you," resumed Mrs. Polemont, after a little pause, "to ask anyone else to come in on Wednesday evening?"

"Isabel, you must do just what you like. I must say it does seem a pity, when you are going to provide a dinner, not to make it serve for a few more. You were saying only yesterday that you

should be obliged to ask Mr. Burstborough again before long."

"Yes, I really must, and for old acquaintance sake, too. Do you remember, Maria, how he used to come to papa's when I was at home, and you always said he had a meaning?"

"Yes, Isabel, and I say it still, if you had only given him a little encouragement. But the doctor is more suitable, and then Mr. Burstborough is left for somebody else."

"Exactly. He told me the other day he wished he could find a nice wife. And he wouldn't mind a bit about money. Mr. Burstborough is not a mean man, though I can't say he was ever a very great favourite of mine. You know he thinks a little too much of himself."

"So would many men, Isabel, if they were as well off as he is. That beautiful new house at Broadminster wants nothing but a wife."

"That's just what he said to me. And I am sure, if I could help him to put one into it, I would. I *do* like men to marry. It is so much more comfortable all round when they get settled."

There was a pause. Maria rooted out some olive-brown tints from among her embroidery silks.

"It is so difficult to make these leaves exactly the right shade. The design leaves so much to your own taste."

And then she added, with no perceptible change of tone,

"Should you not ask Linnet, too, some night?"

"Linnet? Oh, Linnet knows she can come whenever she likes; George is so fond of her. I might have a sort of young people's party, though, when I ask Mr. Burstborough."

"That is what I was thinking."

"Only you know, Maria," and Mrs. Polemont put on one of her knowing little

looks of intelligence, "I am not sure that it would be quite kind to poor young Moriston to bring Mr. Burstborough and Linnet into each other's way. I think there is no doubt that he is very much impressed in that direction."

"My dear Isabel! How you do take things for granted!"

"I only hear what other people say, Maria. I am sure George and the vicar both think there is something in it. You may think *them* gossips, if you like."

"Oh, dear, no, Isabel. I am sure they are nothing of the sort. Only I should not have thought Mr. Aubury would have cared for his sister to have got entangled with a young man of such very uncertain prospects as Mr. Moriston's. Mrs. Flowerdale seems to think very little of him."

"Because he carried off a scholarship that her boy was trying for. One naturally feels things of that kind. And then she thinks Miss Alvisa ought to subscribe

more to the parish charities, instead of spending so much of her spare money over keeping him at college. But still, as you say, his prospects *are* uncertain, unless he gets a professorship they are talking about, somewhere out in India."

"Is that likely?"

"One can never tell. You know I think he is a very decent young fellow, and I should not like to be the one to bring anyone else in between them. By the way, he was saying, when I met him the other day at Miss Alvisa's, that he thought he had seen you before, and he was quite sure he had heard your name. It was when he was up at Airdrie Muir. You know, he comes from there, and from a very humble family, too."

"So Mrs. Flowerdale tells me. I don't think it at all likely that he should have known *me*."

And an expression of annoyance passed over Mrs. Plummersleigh's face.

"Not personally. Oh! dear no, I never meant anything of that sort, of course, because his people were shepherds, or farm-labourers, I believe. But still he might have seen you, all the same, or heard your name."

"I have no recollection. I think, Isabel, I shall go for a walk now."

"Very well. Oh! but there is one thing more I want to ask you."

"What is it?"

"You will let me dress you for Wednesday evening. You know you always did say I had a way of making people look their best when I dressed them, and it will be so very important then. You must forgive me for saying it, Maria, but, if ever you do put a flower into your hair, it looks just as if you had fastened it in with a hammer and nails. You see, you are so very thorough in everything that you do."

For Mrs. Polemont felt that, under the circumstances, she might venture so far in

the direction of a joke, though, in a general way, Mrs. Plummersleigh was not one who cared for pleasantry. But just then the doctor came in, and the conversation was stopped.

Mrs. Polemont had it all over with him that evening. They both agreed that their visitor was on the point of having a most advantageous proposal made to her, though she accepted the probability of it so quietly, far less quietly indeed than a few weeks before she had accepted Mr. Flowerdale's offer of a tract-district in his parish.

Mrs. Polemont did not sleep much that night. She was far too anxious to know what Maria would say; for if there was one subject more than another which stirred to its deepest depths the curiosity of Abbot's Florey, it was the continued bachelorhood of Owen Aubury. Never for years past had a young lady come to visit in the village without the question

being raised as to whether or not she would do for him; and dinners were arranged, and parties were made up for the purpose of bringing them together, though everyone knew, who knew Mr. Aubury at all, that he would sooner put himself anywhere than in the immediate vicinity of an unappropriated lady.

What was the reason of it no one could tell; for a kinder, more benevolent man never existed, nor one who could make a woman happier, or surround her more completely with that quiet, unobtrusive care which the best of wives value so highly. Only he had such nervous, hesitating ways. He had such a painful manner of always appearing to distrust himself. And it was perfectly genuine, too; for, if ever there was a man in whom humility reached the extent of a fault, that man was Owen Aubury.

But then, as Mrs. Polemont said to herself, what a delightful husband he would

make, just for that very reason, if only he met with a wife, or if one could be found for him, who had good sense enough not to take advantage of his gentleness, not to presume upon the generosity which felt as if it never could give enough, and the simplicity which built so little upon all the outward advantages of position and wealth at his bestowal.

And Isabel, in her inmost heart, believed Maria Plummersleigh to be that very woman.

CHAPTER XXI.

MR. AUBURY set out for his appointment at the doctor's house that Wednesday evening, with the comfortable feeling naturally experienced by a man who has at length settled a vexed question, and settled it in the most satisfactory manner possible.

Of course there was the little awkwardness of getting the matter introduced to Mrs. Plummersleigh, who was not a woman to come to anyone's help where readiness of speech was required. She would wait patiently enough to hear what another had to say, but she never, with

graceful ease and tact, took hold of the tangled ends of thought and wound them off upon the reel of her own perception, thus saving that other a world of uncomfortableness. Indeed, Mrs. Plummersleigh's silent, leisurely manner of waiting for what her companion might have to advance, was occasionally, to say the least, very embarrassing, especially to a shy man like Mr. Aubury, whose words had to be pumped up from untold depths of nervousness, and who would therefore in any exigency like the present one, have appreciated a woman who had the power of pouring in a little stream of preliminary sentences, and so, as it were, priming the pump of his own eloquence by her ready ease and fulness of speech. Instead of which, he knew Mrs. Plummersleigh would only look at him out of those calm, patient, inquiring hazel eyes, and never utter a word until his own were ended; a habit

which, for the needs of ordinary social life, would make her all the more pleasant, for there was nothing which worried him so much as a chattering woman, but which, on occasions like this one, threw too much of the burden of commencement upon himself.

However, there was one comfort. He knew that what he was going to do was the right thing, and that was no small help towards getting it done, even though it could not entirely put aside that nervous embarrassment, that almost painful air of hesitation and drawing back, which was as natural to Owen Aubury as its drooping branches to the larch, and its want of roughness to the beech-tree's stem; a failing, no doubt, and as such calling for one's pity. But then one can carve one's name on the beech-tree, and it stays there for ever, whilst the oak will not make room for so much as a single

letter on its tough, resistant old bark.

Coming up the village he met the vicar, cheery, genial as usual, quite ready for a chat with one of his most respected parishioners. Besides, the vicar always felt it a charity to turn and walk alongside of Mr. Aubury and warm him up, and shake off that haze of misty meditation which clung about him like the fog over the bit of willow-fringed brook between Abbot's Florey and Broadminster. It gave him as much pleasure to get a laugh out of the master of Florey Castle as in frosty Christmas weather it did to wrap up all the old women of his parish in blankets and flannel petticoats. And he seldom failed either.

"Good evening, Aubury. I had some thought of coming up to the castle after dinner to smoke a cigar with you, but I see you have other business on hand."

And the vicar nodded at a little frag-

ment of dress-coat, which was to be discerned between the buttonings of Mr. Aubury's dust wrapper.

"Yes, I am dining out. Not a thing that I very often do now-a-days."

"No, indeed. One may as well look for oysters in August as you at a dinner-party. Going to the doctor's, eh?"

"Yes, going to the doctor's," answered Mr. Aubury, with the most unsuspecting simplicity. "But come up some other evening before long, will you? It is never anything but a pleasure to lay an extra knife and fork for you."

"Thank you, all right," said Mr. Flowerdale, with a merry twinkle in his eyes, which Mr. Aubury, still much exercised about the manner of introducing the subject of the lady-companionship to Mrs. Plummersleigh, failed to observe. "And where's Miss Linnet?—gone on before?"

"No; staying behind."

"Staying behind! All alone by herself? Nay, then that's too bad."

"Linnet doesn't mind it a bit, these pleasant summer evenings. I expect she is down by the swan-pools, teaching Keith Moriston to fish. I told him he might come whenever he liked."

The vicar gave a long whistle.

"Oh! come now, Aubury, that is going a little too far. If you mean a young man and a maiden to marry, why, then let them go fishing together in your own grounds on quiet August nights; but, if you don't, I should say you had better let the fishing alone. Young folks will be young, you know."

Mr. Aubury looked puzzled. That was quite a new light upon the subject.

"It really never occurred to me, Mr. Flowerdale; but perhaps, as you say——"

"Yes, indeed, as I say, Mr. Aubury. It's the very thing to make them think

about it, whether you mean them to do so or not. And then, of course, having nothing else to do, and nobody else to talk to, Linnet naturally——"

The vicar stopped and turned rather abruptly to his companion.

"I say, Aubury, for that child's sake it would be the best thing in the world if you were to marry."

Again there came that quiet, gentle tone of repulse in Mr. Aubury's voice. One must go so far with him, meek as he was, and no farther.

"That question is settled, Mr. Flowerdale. It is no use talking about it. But I have considered what is due to Linnet, and I have decided to have a lady-companion for her."

"Bother your lady-companions!" said the vicar, irreverently. "Get a wife for yourself. That is the best sort of lady-companion you or Linnet could have.

And a lady that would be good enough for a companion for Linnet, would be good enough for a wife for yourself. But, however, Aubury, it is your own affair, not mine. And what is Mr. Keith Moriston doing for himself? Anything but fishing with your bonnie young sister?"

"Well, I hope so, or he wouldn't be doing much. Miss Clerehart is not the one to encourage a young fellow to idle away all his long vacation. I suppose he reads."

"Yes. My wife says you may generally see any quantity of books scattering about on the lawn. Perhaps some of them are on fishing. Aubury, you really ought to have a care."

"Thank you, Mr. Flowerdale. But Linnet is too much of a child yet to trouble herself about such things. It is pike and trout with her yet, and nothing else."

The vicar shrugged his shoulders.

"One can never tell when a young girl's fancies begin to wander after other things than pike and trout. Just listen to me, Aubury. You think that because Linnet has lived all her life out of the world, with nobody to talk to but a saint like Miss Alvisa——"

"And a sinner like myself."

"No, not a sinner like yourself, Aubury, but a man that has no more of the thoughts and ways and weaknesses of the world about him than yon elm-tree will have leaves at Christmas time. That's the sort of sinner that *you* are, Aubury. And, because Linnet has lived all her life with the two of you, you think she will keep a child so much the longer."

"And so she will."

"And so she will not. Of all the schemings and plannings that go on in fashionable society, likely enough she knows nothing at all, and well for her

that she doesn't. But of what grows up in a young girl's heart as naturally and beautifully as forget-me-nots by a water-course, and all the more naturally and beautifully because no foot of man, no, nor of beast either, comes there to tread them down, Linnet knows the more, and knows it more purely, just because her own sweet thoughts have taught it to her, not the maxims of your fine society people."

Mr. Aubury looked serious. It was seldom the vicar said so much, and said it so earnestly, except in church, where of course there was nothing of a directly personal nature in it. It might be true; who could tell?

And again he began to think about Miss Alvisa Clerehart, and how she carried no more than Linnet's weight of years upon her, when, with such grave, sweet tenderness looking out from her eyes, she first

owned to him a love which she had kept so faithfully ever since.

Until now.

Owen set his lips together. But even now she had only taken it back into the keeping of her own heart. It was scarcely change; it was want of faith. And the thoughts that she, a girl of eighteen, had cherished then, might not be all strange to Linnet now. Could it indeed be so?

Mr. Flowerdale made a passing remark about the beauty of the bedding-out plants in the little bit of lawn in front of Miss Lauderville's house, which they had just then reached. But Mr. Aubury took no notice. And again he made a remark as they came up to the rural hospital at the doctor's end of the village, and again Mr. Aubury took no notice. The vicar's seed was falling into good ground apparently, and so the vicar held his peace.

Mr. Aubury thought on. Strangely had

the past come back upon him, though that was not the time to hold it so fast. He was again wandering with Alvisa Clerehart through that little bit of fir plantation, and he was listening to the words which had made his life so lonely, and yet so beautiful. And Alvisa then, though with only Linnet's years upon her, had a noble, calm, and far-seeing purpose upon her face which Linnet, wild, impulsive, full of passion, and vigour, and health, and eagerness, must wait many a long day to win. And he, too, in those early years had been grave and purposeful. Life brought its meaning to him full soon, its cares, its burdens. Working his own way out there amongst the mountains and jungles of Ceylon, manhood came to him before its time; and with it came the power to do and to endure, and to wait and to be patient.

That remembrance gave Owen Aubury

comfort. At the age when Alvisa could look into the future, and quietly accept all that it meant of hope deferred, Linnet was a child, with all a child's pleasures still fresh for her. And at the age when he had taken a man's work and a man's burden upon him, Keith Moriston was just nothing but a great over-grown boy, handsome as Apollo, with his square brow and tangling hair and great masterful eyes, and with power enough to do and dare in some future far-off conflict lying latent within him; but as yet only a boy, simple-hearted, shy, unworldly, unpractical down to the very tips of his fingers, as Miss Alvisa herself said. And so there was no need to fear. Besides, everything would be right when Mrs. Plummersleigh came.

He shook himself free from his dreams, and said, brightening up as they passed the hospital,

"Yes, you are a wise man. I will think about it. Perhaps I ought to have done so sooner, but naturally one does not realize how the years go on. I will have this matter settled about the lady-companion for Linnet."

"Or, better still, for yourself," suggested the vicar.

"Thank you. Were you not making some remark about needing funds for the rural hospital just now."

Which was very much the same as saying that the present conversation had better be dropped. And Mr. Flowerdale, who never went farther than a gentleman has a right to go, dropped it accordingly.

CHAPTER XXII.

IT was a pleasant little dinner, just those four of them sitting round the doctor's table. Mrs. Plummersleigh had let her hostess manage for her in the matter of dress, and the result was as eminently satisfactory as the materials allowed. A bit of pink geranium, with some darkly-tinted leaves, skilfully nestled amongst the pale brown braids, which, though their owner was past the bloom of youth, were still too luxuriant to need any other adornment; and another like it, gathering together some folds of creamy lace upon the left shoulder of the navy-blue cashmere,

made Mrs. Polemont's visitor look decidedly more attractive than was her wont. And then there was an air of quiet self-possession about her, the result perhaps of feeling that she was, in some sort, mistress of the situation, which made Mr. Aubury, as he kept looking across to her, more than ever convinced that both for manner, appearance, and character he had done well in choosing such a companion for his sister.

Then the Doctor and Mrs. Polemont were very bright and genial, feeling, of course, that they had done both Mr. Aubury and Mrs. Plummersleigh a kindness by arranging for an understanding to be brought about in this manner, and the guest of the evening himself was the only one who was evidently embarrassed and nervous. But then that was natural. Things would have been far less hopeful, both for the alum and the basket, if no-

thing but the calm of self-possession had been apparent round the daintily-spread dinner-table. And the thought of how happily it would all end by and by, caused the doctor's pretty little wife positively to beam with hardly-concealed triumph and delight.

There was only one thing. She had had a world of trouble in arranging how the actual interview should take place. Even yet it was not settled to her own satisfaction. Of course the gentlemen must have a few minutes to themselves over their wine, whilst she and Maria had a little preliminary confidential chat in the drawing-room. Then the difficulty was how she and George, without any appearance of having planned it, should both disappear, and leave the other couple in undisturbed possession of the apartment.

After talking the matter over with her husband and Mrs. Plummersleigh, separ-

ately, she at last decided that after dinner a walk in the garden should be proposed, and then it should be suggested to Mr. Aubury that perhaps he might like to see the little fern-house, and as Mrs. Plummersleigh was something of a botanist, it would only seem natural that she should accompany him, after which Mrs. Polemont might slip quietly away for ten minutes or more, as seemed advisable.

"Though really, Maria," as the doctor's wife had said, when this last resolution had been put to the vote and carried, "seeing that there is nothing on earth in the fern-house but a few little half-dead scratchy bits of roots, it does seem rather ridiculous to make such a circumstance of taking him to see them. However, he will know why it is proposed, if he has any tact at all, and I have no doubt he will take the hint."

But fortune was more propitious than

Mrs. Polemont had dared to wish. Whilst they were seated at dinner, a messenger came, summoning the doctor to a distant patient. Of course then there was no necessity for Mr. Aubury to linger behind when the ladies returned to the drawing-room, so they all went together; and a short time afterwards Mrs. Polemont made an excuse for going out to shut up her green-house; first, however, having provided that Mr. Aubury and Mrs. Plummersleigh should be in convenient juxtaposition, and having also, by a bright glance of intelligence towards the gentleman, given him to understand that the opportunity he had asked for was now placed at his disposal.

Mr. Aubury so understood it. After a moment or two of silence, during which Maria had been working diligently at that autumn-tinted blackberry-spray, he rose from the sofa on which they were

sitting together, and, leaning against the mantelshelf, began to fidget nervously with a needleful of embroidery silk which he had abstracted from her work-basket.

"Mrs. Plummersleigh," he said, with the hesitation and embarrassment of a man who feels that he is asking a supreme favour, "I do not know whether Mrs. Polemont has told you that I asked for this interview."

Maria, deepening a tint of rosy red at the end of a leaf, neither spoke nor moved. Perhaps something like a tinge of rosy red stole into her own cheek, but beyond that she betrayed no consciousness that a question was about to be asked which would alter the whole course of her future life.

"I have been seeking such an interview some time," he continued, bending a little more closely over her, and still nervously playing with the bit of silk. "And, as I

was very anxious to ascertain your own feelings on the subject, I asked your friend to give me this opportunity of learning them."

Mrs. Plummersleigh looked away past him through the open window to the fir plantation, behind which the grey battlemented tower of Florey Castle, her home that was to be, rose. Then her eyelids dropped, and her fingers slid from her work, and she clasped her hands loosely over her embroidery, and still she spoke no word.

Mrs. Plummersleigh never looked so well as when her eyelids were dropped in that way. They were large, and round, and finely chiselled, and, veiling the somewhat unmeaning hazel eyes, gave an expression of peace to her whole face. Not at all the expression that the women of the district number three saw, when their tract distributor was bent upon convincing them

that frizzled bacon at fivepence a pound was an extravagance not permitted to their station in life, or that lentils and split peas, neither more nor less than lentils and split peas, ought to be their portion six days out of the seven, instead of the fried scraps and short-cakes with which they endeavoured to enliven the tedium of existence on five and sixpence a week.

"I have tried," he continued, unconsciously bending lower and lower over her, "to give you such opportunities as I could of becoming acquainted with myself and Linnet. I felt it would be unjust to you to say anything until you had had at least some little chance of judging whether our tempers and dispositions would harmonize. I would not take advantage of any mere outward circumstances to influence your decision, even if I thought you were a woman to be moved by such things."

Still those dropped eyelids and that calm, peaceful expression. Only the softly-falling leaves which Mrs. Polemont had gathered round that bit of pink geranium amongst the light-brown braids quivered a little, a very little.

"I believe, Mrs. Plummersleigh, you look far below these things. I want you to know myself and Linnet just as we are, and to ask yourself whether you could be happy with us. Do you think you could?"

Maria took her embroidery needle, and began idly to draw it round the outline of a leafy spray of her work. Just for one moment she looked up at the benevolent, earnest eyes bent upon her, then quickly looked down again, and said, in a low tone,

"You are very good to me. I could never have dreamed that you should make me the object of your preference. I will indeed try to deserve it."

The needle trembled in Maria's fingers then. The down-drooping rounded eyelids hid all that the hazel eyes might have to tell, but something in the tones of her voice told it instead; told Mr. Aubury that he had, in fact, made Mrs. Plummersleigh an offer of marriage, and that she had accepted it.

As in a dream one sometimes lives through years, and finds, on waking, that an instant has covered it all; or as in one brief lightning flash the whole country side, over which one has been painfully groping, with each bush and tree, each winding path, cottage, gate, and hovel, is suddenly, amidst the darkness of midnight, clearly printed on the eye; or as drowning men, ere the waves close over them for the last time, recall the whole of their past lives, and live over again all that the buried years have ever held: so in that moment all that he had done, and

all that now remained for him to do, smote upon his consciousness. Past, present, and future, each seemed distinctly revealed.

The love that had been given to Alvisa Clerehart, and kept so long by her, and then let fall; the needs of his little sister Linnet; the much that wife of his might be to her; the loneliness now of his own life, since what he cherished so faithfully was his no longer; the quietness, good sense, amiability of this woman, sitting with bended head and drooped eyelids before him; the unutterable shame and humiliation under which she must be crushed if he released himself by explaining her error; his own inexcusable folly in having so presented his request that it could be construed into other meaning; the sole possibility that remained of atoning for that blunder by giving what she had with all innocence and good-will

shown herself ready to receive—all these things crowded upon him, yet each one of them clear, distinct, separate, in that little moment during which Mrs. Plummersleigh was tremulously drawing her needle round the outline of that blackberry spray.

Obeying the first impulse which stirred him, that of pity, honour, chivalry, self-sacrifice; knowing not, thinking not whether it was for good or evil; knowing only that he was doing all he could to shield a woman from the consequences of his own error, he took the hand that just trembled upon the leaves, and, holding it resolutely in his own, said,

"Then, Maria, let it be so."

That Mrs. Plummersleigh did not withdraw her hand was sufficient reply. And then he raised it to his lips.

Perhaps it was as well that just then

Mrs. Polemont, with a judicious little preparatory process of rustling and bustling, made known the fact that she was returning to the drawing-room.

When she entered it, Maria was calmly engaged upon her embroidery at one end of the sofa, and Mr. Aubury was leaning against the mantelshelf, twisting a bit of silk round his fingers, not looking much more embarrassed than he had done ever since he came into the house.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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